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Realisms Traditional, Tragic, Depressive and  
Moral: The changing fiction of Jonathan  
Franzen.

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Master of Creative Arts (Research) 2012  
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I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Annabel Stafford

## Acknowledgements:

This novel and thesis have benefited greatly from the help of my supervisor, Anthony Macris. I am also thankful to Gabrielle Carey, who directed me to Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* and with whom I have had several discussions about "The New Sincerity". Stephanie Forrest of Decision Marketing provided (paid) proofreading services (for grammar, spelling and referencing).

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## **ABSTRACTS:**

### **copyright: a novel**

Phoebe Esther Valor is on the brink of middle age and in the middle of an existential crisis when she's offered a lifeline: a desperate editor at the *Sydney Tribune* notices the story that Phoebe has listed for the following day's paper could make the front page.

There's just one problem: the story he wants doesn't exist yet-or at least not quite. And to get it Phoebe will have to convince, cajole or trick her subject, Immigration Minister Calvin Delahunty, into saying what the editor wants him to. It's not so different from what reporters do every day. But on this particular day – desperate for a rare Page One and a final shot at significance – Phoebe goes a little bit further. When she can't get Delahunty to say exactly what she wants to hear, she convinces herself it was close enough and writes the words into his mouth. And when Delahunty goes along with her fraud, Phoebe realises she could be taking a much more active role in her career- and Delahunty's. And so, story by story, reporting what he says and does before he says and does it, Phoebe begins to create a very different Calvin Delahunty from the original. And a very different Phoebe.

### **Realisms Traditional, Tragic, Depressive and Moral: The changing fiction of Jonathan Franzen.**

This thesis examines the work of American author Jonathan Franzen and asks whether the oft-told narrative, that of a young postmodernist writer who abandons artistic

ambition and cultural critique for mainstream success, is sufficient to explain the major differences between Franzen's early novels and his later work.

I will contend that while Franzen's later work does not offer a postmodern critique in the same vein as his first two novels, neither is it a retreat into pre-modernist realism. Indeed, I will argue that Franzen abandoned postmodernism as a literary form partly because of what he perceives as its role in entrenching the existing capitalist hegemony. And instead of going back to pre-modernist forms, as though theory and its discoveries had never occurred, Franzen's later work moves beyond postmodernism in search of a new literary form that can maintain a critical distance from, and therefore offer an analysis of, the advanced capitalist society in which we find ourselves. As such, his more recent writing has much in common with the emerging literary genre that has been called post-postmodernism. To frame my argument, I will use close textual analysis of the Christian holidays—that is, Christmas, Easter and Thanksgiving—in Franzen's fiction due to their ubiquity and thematic importance in his work.

# **copyright: a novel**

By Annabel Stafford

## CHAPTER ONE

The computer rang and Phoebe Esther Valor asked for a sign. A very specific sign. More like an omen, really. If time ticked over from 3.47 to 3.48 before the webcam rang again, that would be the signal: everything was going to be OK.

*Brrrrring.*

Still 3.47PM. Phoebe groaned and dropped her head to the desk. Of course it wasn't going to be *OK*. The only people who used webcam were the editors in Page One Conference, who only called if they wanted your story for the front page, or the editor, Bottie, who only rang if he was going to fire you. And no one was calling Phoebe about a front page; she hadn't even listed a story.

*Brrring.*

"Oh please shut *up!*" Phoebe whispered. She didn't understand why Bottie had to use webcam. Did he want her humiliation witnessed by the entire Canberra Bureau? Actually, she thought, he probably did. He could use Phoebe as a cautionary tale '*this is what happens when you're not hungry enough for the yarn*'. But she *was* hungry. She didn't understand how she could have missed *another* story. She banged her head quietly against the desk. She should have made more calls, pushed her contacts harder ... *something*. Now she was going to lose her job, the job she'd moved to Canberra for, the job that was supposedly going to make her a star, the job that meant she never got home before 10pm, that meant she never met anyone, that meant she would probably die alone and now she didn't even *have* the stupid job. She didn't have anything. Phoebe's eyes smarted with the unfairness of it all. The truth was, she'd never even really had the



chance to be good. The *Trib* had never backed her, not like they did their 'star reporters'. As if *Bottie*, if he were the Government or the Opposition or whoever was leaking to the other papers would even consider leaking to Phoebe given the *Trib* never ran her stories except as anorexic columns on page eight. Not that she'd say this to Bottie, she thought. Didn't want to be a whinger.

*Brrriiinggg.*

"WOULD SOMEONE ANSWER THAT FUCKING PHONE?" The Bureau Chief, Martin Hennessey.

Phoebe raised her head. "Sorry, Hen," she called out.

Hen grunted and kept stabbing at his keyboard. Phoebe sighed, put on her earphones and clicked open the video screen.

Edward Talbot, universally referred to as Bottie, was mid-sentence.

"Get the kid with the hole in his heart on one and we'll put Anna on three," he barked, leaning back in his chair and kicking his feet up onto the conference table, a big man in the body of a small one.

He was calling from Page One Conference. Phoebe swallowed. Bottie was going to fire her in front of *Conference*? She clutched at her stomach.

"You do not tink sree is too ... vell ... ovious?" Phoebe recognised the Indian trill of the Foreign Affairs Editor.

"It's an international *incident*," someone said off screen and there was a hoot of laughter.

"I'm *serious*," the voice said, wounded. "It's been on the *New York Times* website and on the *Post* and the *Guardian*."

Phoebe realised they were talking about Anna Wallace, the Australian model who'd lost her skirt in a fashion parade, but had bravely marched back down the catwalk in her G-string.

"We *cannot* put a woman in underpants on page three," the Foreign Editor said firmly, setting off a general groan.

On screen, Bottie flicked a hand. "Of more pressing concern at this point is the fact that we're well and truly fucked for tom—" he stopped.

Phoebe saw her news editor, Damien, nod at the screen behind Bottie. The editor swung his feet off the table and spun around. His face filled Phoebe's computer screen like he was gawking at her through a magnifying glass.

"Phoebe," he said, "Conference here."

"Oh ...hi," Phoebe tried not to go red as she thought of her face projected up on the wall they were all now staring at.

"So, we're interested in this story about the statue," Bottie said. "Is it true they've used the word 'nigger'?"

"Mmm?" Phoebe rubbed her forehead. She tried to orient herself. She wasn't being fired?

"Phoebe!" Bottie barked. "They used that word? Nigger?"

Hang on, Phoebe thought. Hang on just a minute. Was Bottie talking about yesterday's story? The story she'd listed that Damien hadn't been interested in? Had he recycled it? It had been around the indigenous press for at least a week. And on Damien's list for two days already...

"Phoebe!"

“Uh?” Phoebe tried to remember the main points of the story: a statue of a dead footballer, nickname “Nigger Smith”, erected in the square of a flea-bite town on the Queensland border somewhere. The local Aborigines not happy, understandably, to have the “N-word” emblazoned across their town commons. Not a bad story, Phoebe thought, but surely too old by now?

“Well *that’s* a fucking scandal, isn’t it?” Bottie said.

“Ahhh ... Yes, yes. It is,” Phoebe said, finally realising she might have a front page within her grasp. “I think it’s a total scandal—”

“Problem is we need someone to actually *say* it’s a scandal,” Bottie interrupted.

“Well,” said Phoebe, trying to think quickly, “the racial equality commissioner said it was—”

“He would though, wouldn’t he?” Bottie spun round to face Damien, his shaggy white hair flicking in Phoebe’s face. “What about the feds? Reckon Delahunty would bite?”

Phoebe put her hand up and started explaining, over Bottie’s virtual shoulder, that the Immigration Minister, Calvin Delahunty, didn’t usually buy into this kind of controversy. Bottie flicked his hand dismissively.

“It’s a free kick at the states. Surely he’d be into that?” Bottie said to Damien, who glanced up at Phoebe on the wall.

“Can’t see why not,” Damien said.

Phoebe tried to work out how the story related to state-federal relations.

The health editor, who had ambitions above the health round, piped up. “Ask him if he wants you to do a ‘Declined to Comment’.”

Bottie thumped the table and his pen ricocheted towards Damien. “Yep. That’s it. A DTC.”

He looked up at Phoebe. “Ralph’s right, Phoebe. Delahunty has *got* to respond to this. I mean what kind of Immigration Minister is he if he doesn’t condemn this fucking thing? Or get into the state for caving in to racists? I mean it’s just fucking outrageous.” He spun back.

“But,” Phoebe tried to push her face into the huddle, but she was drowned out by exclamations of outrage as one by one the editors realised they were off the hook.

“Great!” said Bottie over his shoulder, “Phoebe, give us 70 cems. Paul, can you get a pic—”

And here conference hung up, leaving Phoebe to plead dizzily with a Uighur boy and his camel who smiled cheerfully back at her from the screensaver. She had two hours and 33 minutes to get Delahunty to say something that so far he didn’t even know he thought.

Phoebe apologised profusely to Tara Clarke, Calvin Delahunty’s Chief of Staff and Media Manager, who was *not happy* about being called so late in the day. Phoebe mentioned the story was running off Page One, she outlined the story angle and content (praying that Hen wouldn’t overhear and think she was one of those journos in bed with the flaks). Tara said she’d try to mention Phoebe’s request to the Minister.

Delahunty rang at 6.08pm. It sounded like he was calling from a toilet cubicle.

“Hi Phoebe. Calvin Delahunty here,” he said, announcing his name like a TV reporter signing off. “Tara *insists* on being present to make sure you don’t trick me into getting myself in trouble,” he brayed. Speakerphone, Phoebe thought.

“Those rednecks in NSW playing up again, are they?” Delahunty said. And before Phoebe had even opened her mouth to reply, he was off on a spectacular—and highly print-worthy—tirade: the NSW Progressive Party were a bunch of holier-than-thou hypocrites who pandered to racists because it meant more votes, they were politically correct but compassionately deficient, they’d recruit the Klu Klux Klan if it meant winning the election. Phoebe wished she had better shorthand.

“Of course that’s all off the record,” Delahunty giggled, “the PM would have my guts for *garters* if you printed any of that!”

Phoebe managed a ha-ha. She swallowed. “No worries, Minister. It’s totally off the record ... *if* you say so. I mean, if you’re *sure* ... because, you know, those Double Bay ladies would go *weak at the knees* for that sort of talk! There would be fan clubs popping up all over the place!”

Silence.

“I mean, I don’t ‘spose you could give me something along those lines *on-the-record*?” Phoebe pleaded.

“Well, well. I suppose we can’t disappoint the ladies,” Delahunty said. Phoebe could hear the scrawl of pen on notepad, whispering; Delahunty cleared his throat. “Something on-the-record,” he said slowly. “On. The. Record ... hmmmm ... let’s see ... hmmm ... how about ... no, Tara, I don’t think ... OK, OK, here we go. Are you ready?”

“Sure am!” Phoebe said brightly, grinding her jaw.

“ON the record,” Delahunty made a revving noise at the back of his throat. “It is of course regrettable when particular organizations or groups or communities feel offended by the actions of other actors, groups or communities whether or not those

actions are intentionally offensive.” He paused. “However, I would say in this instance it’s important to remember that the construction in question, being a statue, rather than a commercial or domestic building or recreational facility, is smaller than 10 metres squared. It therefore falls under the purview of state regulations—it is not a federal matter—and is therefore a matter for the State Progressive Government to deal with. If they fail to do so, they will be failing the people of NSW.”

It was 6.23pm. Phoebe stopped scribbling and massaged her jaw.

“How was that?” the Minister asked, after a few seconds of silence.

“To be honest,” Phoebe said, “I think I need something a little stronger.

Something like what you said at the beginning, you know, about the NSW Government pandering to racism?”

Delahunty brayed again. Phoebe could imagine his head thrown back; the shiny pink face, the huge white rabbit teeth slick with saliva.

“Naughty Phoebe,” he giggled. “Tut, tut! You *do* want to get me into trouble!”

Phoebe pulled the phone away from her ear and flipped her middle finger at it. The heat pulsed up her neck and cheeks and she saw a picture of herself as a big, ugly thermometer. She forced a giggle “Oh you know me too well, Minister!” she said.

“You know, Phoebe,” Delahunty said, putting on a deep-throat voice, “OFF-the-record, if you want a really good story, you should check out Senator Stone. I’m told he’s spoken openly in branch meetings about using the Chinese to get his candidates pre-selected. *They* think he’s helping them join a community group, but of course he’s actually paying for their party memberships!” he giggled. “And the really funny thing is Stone is a total xenophobe. He won’t even go to yum cha!”

6.27pm. She hadn’t even started writing.

“I’ll check it out,” she said, trying to speak slowly. “But it would be great if I could get something from you for *this* story ... You know, deadline and all that, and I don’t want to have to go to the Opposition—”

“Tara didn’t tell me you were talking to the Opposition,” Delahunty’s voice sounded like a door slamming shut.

“I’m not, I’m not,” Phoebe said quickly, “it’s just that Bottie is super-keen on this story and if he doesn’t get something he thinks is strong enough he’ll make me—”

“Right,” said Delahunty, revving his throat again. “How about this: I am sorry to hear that some NSW citizens have been offended by certain events in that state. My suggestion to those citizens is that they take the matter up with their state government, which has been elected to represent its citizens in these matters, but which appears to have gone AWOL yet again ... There!” he said. “Even old Bottie’s got to be happy with that! Now, OFF the record again—though, that bit about Bottie is off the record too, of course!” He giggled. “Did you know” Delahunty named the Shadow Immigration Minister, “is doing the wild thing with her chief of staff?” He giggled. “You did NOT hear it from me. But listen, check it out; I’m told it’s definitely true ... And she’s married with kids! Anyway Tara’s looking daggers at me, must fly. Thanks again Phoebe!”

It was 6.30 pm. Phoebe had three and half A5 pages of crap.

Matilda Meares, who sat opposite Phoebe, perpetually sucking spit through her clear vanity braces and generally being a bitch, popped her head up over the partition that separated Phoebe’s desk from her own.

“Get anything?” she asked.

And then Damien rang.

Phoebe wasn't lying when she told Damien she had some strong stuff. She was just so discombobulated she didn't know *what* she had. She needed just a *second* of headspace to read through her notes and work out what was on the record and what was off and whether she could paraphrase sense into any of it. Plus, the whole time she was on the phone with Damien she could hear the sluice of saliva through braces, which meant Matilda was eavesdropping.

As soon as Phoebe put down the receiver, Matilda stuck her head back over the partition.

"So the Delahunty yarn's really strong is it?" she asked. She sucked her spit and smiled sweetly. "I think they were a bit worried in Sydney that he wouldn't say anything—"

"Sorry Mads," Phoebe slipped on her noise-cancelling headphones. "I'm really under the pump."

It was not untrue to say Delahunty had called the statue of Nigger Smith racist, Phoebe told herself. Hadn't he acknowledged people in NSW had been offended? And the context of the story—not to mention their conversation—had made it very clear it was a racist statue that had caused offence. Nor was it untrue to say he had slammed the NSW Government for refusing to stand up to racism. Hadn't he accused it of going AWOL, which meant, by definition, that the Government was running away? All Phoebe had done was translate him into language the rest of the population could understand. Journalists did it every day.



Phoebe woke to an electric birdcall coming from somewhere deep inside her handbag. She squinted at the red numbers floating in the blackness beside her: 5.37AM. Tara, she thought, immediately awake.

“Your story is bullshit,” Tara snarled before Phoebe had had a chance to open her mouth. “You completely verballed Calvin—”

“I don—” Phoebe tried to interject.

“This is simply a courtesy call,” Tara ploughed on, “to let you know we’ll be bringing this up with Hen. And Bottie. We want an apology in tomorrow’s paper. And that’s an *apology*. Not a correction. I’ll send you the words—”

Phoebe tried to explain about the translation. She tried to point out that she’d made it clear the statue was racist. She tried to argue that AWOL meant running away since it was without leave. But Tara wouldn’t let her get a word in.

“Do whatever you fucking well want,” Phoebe exploded. “But if I did misquote him it was only because you can’t understand a fucking word that comes out of his mouth. And, and ... because pardon me for believing no one could be such a coward—” Tara had hung up on her.

Phoebe pitched her phone into the bed and growled through a clenched jaw. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. FUCK. She dropped onto her bed and pulled the doona over her head. A front-page correction. Bottie would go nuts. She’d be taken off Immigration for sure. Probably fired. Or worse. She’d be the joke of the press gallery. She could just picture Matilda and Tara giggling in the toilets, the hot camera guy from Channel 2 rolling his eyes as she walked past. *Media Watch* might pick even pick up the story and then she’d be humiliated on national TV. They’d probably find footage of her at the Press Club with spinach between her teeth, underneath lighting that showed up what the

lady at the Lancome counter at Myer's had just that weekend described as her “mature skin”. Her mum and dad would see it. And all those girls from high school who would swap YouTube footage of Phoebe at the Press Club attached to emails with subject lines like: *OMG!* Or *How embarrassment!* Phoebe groaned. She should have paid attention to the sign.

## CHAPTER TWO

Calvin (he was always Calvin, never Cal or Vinnie or Dela) was on his seventeenth push-up when the phone rang. *Oh Fortuna* captured the struggle, but yes, also the *romance*, of political life just *so* well. He stood, twisted right and left to admire his biceps in the mirrored doors of his room-length walk-in wardrobe, then padded over to his bed and picked up the phone.

“Good morning Ta-Ra,” he said. He pressed the loudspeaker button with his right pinkie, picked up a tube of Kiehl’s moisturiser and squeezed a thick white worm across his chest. Then he froze.

“She wrote *what*?”

“She said you slammed the NSW government for going AWOL on racists,” Tara’s voice whined through the tiny speaker.

“She used that actual *word*?” Calvin hit the speaker button a second time and pressed the phone to his ear, the white dollop of cream jiggling on his chest.

“No, not ‘slammed’,” he dropped his voice to a whisper, “*racist* ... That little *bitch*! I thought you said she was tame” Calvin paced. “Well, Tara, I hate to be tough, but that’s what I pay *you* for.” He exhaled loudly. “Yes, yes ... and tell her I want it in large font in TOMORROW’s edition or I’m going *straight* to Bottie ... No, of course I’m not *really* going to go to him, he’s a grumpy old pinko, but she’s not smart enough to work that—”

Calvin’s clock radio buzzed on like a fly-zapper. *And now for our lead story*, the newsreader said over the fading strains of the urgent intro music. *Calvin Delahunty has so far kept a low profile—*

“Shhh!”

*But the Minister has today earned the praise*

“Tara, shut *up*!”

*-and the anti-racism commissioner after he slammed the NSW Progressive government for failing to stop a racist statue—”*

“AM’s on,” Calvin said, “call me back.” He pressed his phone off and sat down on the bed, pulling the eiderdown up over his legs. It was not that he was not appalled, *appalled*, by those philistines in NSW. He shuddered as he pictured them: welfare-cheats with first cousins for parents and McDonalds’ addicts for kids. And the NSW Progressives were not much better. Unfortunately, it was a delicate matter. There were quite a lot of these people in Australia and, doubly unfortunately, they were allowed to vote. On account of their very low IQs, they were very easy fish to catch. A few words here and there and they assumed you were on their side; therefore they were on yours. But if you hinted otherwise, they were gone. At the same time, you also had to present yourself as anti-racist (without ever, EVER actually saying the R word) otherwise you’d alienate the moderate supporters, like the ones Calvin relied upon to keep his inner Sydney seat—the same Double Bay ladies that read the bloody *Trib* over their lattes. Journalists like little Phoebe Valor had no appreciation of how difficult it was to be a politician.

Calvin’s phone vibrated. It was a message from the head of the Senate Committee on Human Rights, a Progressive called Ruth Lopez: “gr8 work!” Calvin shuddered. Horrible fat Ruth Lopez with the hairy upper lip!

The phone vibrated again, and then again: three new messages. He turned it off so he could concentrate on what the radio was saying about him.

*“I think it’s fair to say the NSW Government has been playing the race card by refusing to stop this statue. But thankfully, the Immigration Minister has shown that not all politicians are afraid to do what is right, even if it costs votes. I think a lot of Australians will sit up and take notice of Mr Delahunty for the courageous stand he has taken on this issue.”*

The newsreader came back on. “And that was Anti-Racism Commissioner Tom Gibson ending our story by Jenny Faulkner. The ABC asked the NSW Premier to respond to this program, but he hasn’t returned our calls.”

Calvin switched his phone back on. It rang immediately and a picture of Martin Suitor, the PM’s terrifying chief of staff, flicked onto the screen. *Oh Fortuna* had lost its romance. Calvin let it ring out and waited until the phone vibrated with Suitor’s message. He clicked quickly through the message options—*six* new voicemails—and saved the first five for later.

“Suitor here,” the gruff voice said, “*Trib* story was a bit left field. Next time check in with me first. Lucky for you, the PM’s happy it’s got the shit sandwich with education off the front page. So you can go hard on it for now. But as I said, check in with me next time. These issues can go either way. See you in Cabinet.”

Calvin pressed five to listen to the message again. Suitor was obviously shitty, but the PM must have called him off. *You can go hard on it.* Well good. He was glad the PM had finally put Suitor in his place. The man was a bully. Several times Calvin had witnessed Suitor using his massive bulk to stand over senior politicians and journalists; he had at least one woman in tears every day. The irony was, he’d never been more than a number-cruncher; rumour was he hadn’t even been to university—not that anyone would dare ask him—he was just some tired old hack the PM had poached from one of the tabloids. It irked Calvin that a man like that, uneducated and more to the point *unelected*,

basically ran the country. If Calvin ever became Prime Minister—and it was not that far-fetched; he *had* been the youngest-ever politician elected to the House of Representatives until that precocious little bitch last year—he would take advice from his *Ministers*, i.e. the experts, not people like Suitor.

Calvin listened to his other messages. One from a cabinet colleague whose voice, Calvin noted happily, was fairly *strained* with jealousy, “how in hell did you get Suitor to give the go-ahead for the *Trib* interview?” he wanted to know. Calvin couldn’t wait to tell him he hadn’t even bothered to *ask* Suitor. His Amelia had rung too: *she and the kids were werry, werry proud of daddykins mwa mwa mwa*. There was a message of congratulations from one of the younger MPs, a chap that looked up to Calvin. *You have the biggest balls in the government*, he said admiringly. Calvin brayed. The last two messages were from Tara. Apparently two of the breakfast programs had already rung. Calvin didn’t wait for the end of the last message.

“It’s me. Where are they filming? Can they do a cross from the parly studios? ... Good. Book me in with half an hour in between—that should be fine. And can you get me into the parly hairdresser at 7.30? She’ll open early for me. Oh, by the way, Suitor called ... Oh fine, fine. He says the PM is really happy and we should go as hard as possible... You told her to do *what*? No, no, no, no, no. We don’t want an apology—no, or a correction. She was just paraphrasing what *I* said. I mean you were there, you heard me... Yes, I know. It’s about time someone stood up to those philistines ... Yes, anyway, I wonder if you’d better clear up the correction thing with Valor? Make sure she’s not thinking of putting one in. Tell her there was some kind of misunderstanding and you’ve listened to the tape again yada yada ... Tara, make triple sure Valor’s not going to go anywhere with this apology misunderstanding, OK? She seems like the jumpy type.

## CHAPTER THREE

On Tuesday morning, Phoebe was in the Queanbeyan Primary School Hall waiting for Calvin Delahunty to arrive for his photo opp. He was already twenty minutes late and the pre-adolescents were getting restless. Phoebe's feet were killing her. No one had thought to put chairs out for the journalists.

She shifted against the rough brick wall, trying to find a position in which she could hold her Dictaphone, notepad and pen and still manage to write. It was a difficult task, made more difficult by the fact of her being wedged in between *The Daily Mail's* Tom Nguyen, an ex-AFL player who still had the bulk to prove it, and Tara, who was wearing a nose-tingling amount of perfume.

There was an outbreak of whispering at the back of the Hall and Phoebe turned to see Delahunty standing in the open double doors, flanked by two men.

He waved his right hand presidentially and removed his aviator sunglasses. Phoebe wondered when he'd started wearing aviators. Or stopped cutting his hair? He strode slowly up the centre of the hall, his hands trailing slightly, as if he were giving the children the opportunity to touch them. He was really enjoying this whole left-wing rebel MP thing, Phoebe thought. She wondered if she should ask him for a commission. Or was it a finder's fee? He wouldn't even have *commented* on the n-word statue if it hadn't been for her.

Delahunty reached the stage and bounded up the steps like a game show contestant. He spun around to face the assembly and the bank of television cameras that had suddenly materialised at the back of the hall.

“Why are there so many cameras?” Phoebe wondered aloud. Delahunty’s popularity had certainly grown since the statue story, but still, a *primary school* visit?

Larissa Lipton from Channel 12 poked her head around Tom. “Didn’t that refugee guy call you?” she whispered.

“What refugee guy?” Tom demanded.

“Said he was going to get in and ask some tough questions,” Larissa whispered. She checked their faces to see if they’d been called, “but maybe he only spoke to the TVs ...” She looked apologetic.

Phoebe’s stomach tightened. A story was going to happen. She scribbled on her notepad to make sure her pen was working.

Up on stage, Delahunty swept his hand around the room, “thank you all *very* much for inviting me!” he said with exaggerated excitement.

He turned to the principal. “And you must be ...” He stopped. He squinted at Tara who was now standing on the opposite side of the Hall and seemed to be chewing on the side of her mouth.

“Mrs Mignacca,” the Principal said, easing herself into one of the two chairs up on stage, and gesturing Calvin toward the other. “And actually you invited yourself. But we’re very pleased to have you.”

Delahunty brayed.

“So,” Mrs Mignacca said. “Tell us. What’s an Immigration Minister do, Mr Delahunty?”

“Oh, well, not very much, Mrs Mac!” Calvin brayed. “I can call you that can’t I?”

Phoebe cringed. It was like watching an amateur try stand up comedy.



“You could,” Mrs Mignacca said. “You would be the only one.”

“Oh good,” Calvin beamed, “I do love to be different.”

“Right,” Mrs Mignacca said. “So ... how about you talk us through your average day?”

Phoebe scanned the Hall for some kind of colour to pad her story with. Kids with scuffed shoes and scabbed knees. Boys flicking bits of paper. Girls doing one another’s hair. Cliché after cliché. Phoebe sighed. There was a movement on the opposite side of the Hall and she looked up to see a pair of crinkly eyes staring straight at her. One of the eyes winked.

“Oh!” Phoebe said, without meaning to. She dropped her gaze to the floor and willed herself not to blush. She double-checked her pen was still working, fiddled with her Dictaphone. Then, very carefully, she raised her eyes again. He was still looking at her. He grinned and pushed his dirty blonde hair out of his eyes. He mouthed something. “Sung?” Phoebe wondered? “No. *Sprung*.” Her breath caught. Did he mean she’d been sprung? Or he had? Her face was hot. He had a mischievous mouth. Twisty. Was he a *teacher*?

“Of course, that’s just a very, very, VERY condensed version,” she heard Delahunty saying. “I mean really just a tiny, *teensy*, little bit of what I do each day.”

Phoebe remembered what she was supposed to be doing.

“OK,” the Principal said. “Thanks, Minister.” She nodded meaningfully at the Hall and began to clap. The children followed her in half-hearted applause.

“Thank you, everyone,” Calvin beamed. “Now, Mrs Mac, I’m very happy to shake hands with the kids, sign autographs ...”

Phoebe could feel Tom shuddering with laughter behind her. Trying to look casual, like she was interested in seeing how the kids were reacting, Phoebe swept her eyes down the length of the Hall. The teacher was leaning back in his chair now, one scuffed sneaker resting atop the other, arms crossed over his chest, hair flopping over one eye. He turned his head. Then looked her up and down. Nodded. He was checking her out. He grinned. Phoebe felt her face go red and smiled back. She was glad she'd worn lipstick.

"Oh, *hallo* you," Larissa said quietly from behind her and suddenly Phoebe realised the teacher wasn't checking her out after all. He was checking out Larissa. Of course he was. Larissa Lipton from Channel 12 was the hottest girl in the press gallery, or so Phoebe was told, not that she could argue with that assessment: red hair, large brown eyes, big boobs and the kind of cutesy face that meant she could get away with turning up on the Deputy PM's doorstep at 6am with camera crew in tow or asking the Gallery's most senior economics reporter if he could be, like, a total doll and just give her the main *gist* of the budget cause she was so, like, innumerate. Phoebe looked away, feeling stupid.

"Aren't you married?" she heard Tom ask Larissa.

"Engaged," Larissa said. "And I can still *look*."

Phoebe sighed and flipped open her notebook. "Offered to sign autographs," she wrote. Unless the refugee guy turned up and caused a scene, this little school visit would be about as newsworthy as a Greenpeace statement on climate change. Phoebe wondered if she could convince Damien to run a colour sketch? She looked up at Delahunty on stage. Probably not, she thought. She sighed.

Things had been good for Phoebe ever since the statue story. She'd managed to stretch that yarn alone into three front-page stories. The TVs and radios had all followed it up: it was *the* big Canberra story for at least three days. Then came all the phone calls

and the lunch invitations and the new story leads. Phoebe didn't want her run to end. It felt good to be the star for once. She couldn't help feeling a surge of pride every morning when the number of the Sydney newsdesk flashed up in the caller ID window of her phone. She loved being able to tell Damien that she didn't want to get his hopes up but that she had *a couple of things on the boil*. She loved being able to say, almost as an equal, that they should really run an analysis piece about the effect of the new work visas on the domestic workforce. Most of all she loved knowing that Matilda was listening in on the other side of the dividing wall and seething with jealousy; Matilda with her vanity braces and her tortoiseshell Prada glasses that Phoebe suspected were just for show given how Matilda always wore them pushed on top of her head. Phoebe smiled to herself. She was probably a terrible person for being happy about Matilda's jealousy. But, whatever. Phoebe had been the victim of Matilda's story assassinations too many times to care.

Mrs Mignacca, deflecting Delahunty's push for autographs and handshakes, had called for questions.

Someone asked if he'd been scared when he'd stood up to those racists?

Tom groaned.

"Of course!" said Delahunty with disarming faux-humility. "It's always scary to stand up to bullies. But we have to stand up to them anyway, don't we boys and girls?"

A boy near the back wanted to know if it was true the Prime Minister wore high heels to make him look taller than he really was.

Delahunty brayed. "Oh, I couldn't betray a state secret like *that*," he said.

The teachers laughed.

"Um, also" the boy said, putting his hand up again. "I got another question?"

"Of course," Calvin smiled.

“Um. So, I was just wondering why you put those kids in gaol?” the boy asked, suddenly sounding a lot more confident. “Like, you know, the refugees? Isn't that like against the law or something?”

“Ooooh *shit!*” Tom said gleefully. “Ambush!”

There was a sudden flurry. Phoebe scrambled to switch her Dictaphone on, then scrawled down what she could remember of the kid's question. Was it possible *he* was the refugee advocate?

Up on stage, Mrs Mignacca was staring at Calvin who was staring at Tara. After a beat or two, he seemed to recover himself; he chuckled and shuffled in his chair.

“Well,” he said. “Well, *first* of all, I *should* say those children are not actually refugees, they're asylum seekers. Now that means it hasn't yet been proven that Australia needs to look after them—”

“Oh, so you *are* allowed to put asylum seekers in gaol?” the boy asked. Phoebe noticed the cameras had relocated, no doubt to fit the kid in the frame with Delahunty.

Calvin was red. “Well that was my other point. We are not putting them in gaol—”

“Really?” Mrs Mignacca asked. “What would you call a detention centre then, Mr Delahunty?”

Delahunty looked shocked. “I thought this was a chance for the *children* to ask questions,” he said, avoiding her eye. “But, since you ask, a detention centre is a safe and comfortable place where people can wait until their claims are processed—”

“Excuse me, Minister?” a plummy English voice interjected. Phoebe turned to see Larissa's teacher still leaning back in his chair, his arm half raised in a question.

“Isn’t it true that the United Nations has called Australia’s detention system akin to gaoling people?”

Delahunty looked like he’d been hit in the face.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Minister,” Mrs Mignacca said, looking anything but. “I forgot to introduce you to Sam Carver,” she said.

“Dr Carver is part of an organisation called Doctors supporting Refugees,” she said. “We thought we’d invite him along to make sure we got a balanced view of the issue. Hope you don’t mind.”

Delahunty stretched his mouth into a smile. “Of course not,” he said through his teeth.

Phoebe’s mind was spinning. He wasn’t a teacher. Was he Larissa’s refugee guy? Had they met before?

“So,” Mrs Mignacca said. “What would you say to Dr Carver’s question?”

“Oh ... well,” Delahunty ha-ha’d. “First of all, I don’t think the UN is what you’d call a terribly *objective* observer. I have personally been to a *number* of detention centres and I can promise you, they are *nothing* like a gaol.”

“Really?” Dr Carver said, only it sounded more like reeeee-Ah-lee. “If that’s the case, why does the government refuse to let independent doctors in. Actually, independent anyone in?”

“Oh, I don’t think—” Delahunty said.

“My organisation has been trying to get into Central Detention Centre for almost 18 months,” the doctor said. “In fact, we’ve been trying to get in ever since the UN said it had”, he reached inside his jacket and fished out a piece of paper, unfolded it slowly, and read, “grave concerns for the mental health of the inmates”.

“Like I said, doctor,” Calvin said, addressing the air somewhere near the ceiling. “Nothing *like* a gaol. And as to the matter of independent doctors visiting detainees, I’m afraid this is the first I’ve heard of it, so I will of course need a full briefing before I can comment further.”

The boy with the tough questions was waving his hand.

“Um, Sir?” he said. He waited until Delahunty looked at him.

“Yes?” Delahunty replied, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand.

“Aren’t you like the boss of the detention centres and everything?”

“Yes, I am,” Delahunty smiled, “in a manner of speaking.”

“So then can’t you just say it’s cool for Dr Carver to go in and look at the kids and that?” the student asked.

“That’s a good question,” Mrs Mignacca said. “Surely you have the power to do that, Minister?”

“Well, yes, of course,” Delahunty said, licking his lips. “But it’s not as simple as just” he made quotation marks with his fingers “letting the doctor in”.

“Oh,” Mrs Mignacca said, “so you *don’t* have that power?”

Delahunty snorted. “Well, yes, of course I do. But there are security checks to be done, background checks yada, yada, yada. I won’t bore you with the details.”

Behind Phoebe, Tom cleared his throat.

“Excuse me, Minister,” he said.

“Oh, hallo, Tom!” Delahunty exclaimed, as though, Phoebe thought, Tara *hadn’t* rung around to make sure all the journos would be in attendance. “I think we’ll save the questions for the kids today.”

“Oh no, that’s OK,” Mrs Mignacca said, nodding at Tom. “Please, go ahead.”

There was whispering and a hand shot up.

“Yes?” Mrs Mignacca pointed at the hand.

“Miss, that’s *Tom Nguyen*,” came the reply.

Mrs Mignacca raised her eyebrows and looked over at Tom. She obviously had no idea who Tom Nguyen was.

“Oh,” she said. “Well, it’s good of Mr Nguyen to visit us—“

“Can we get his autograph?”

“Well, I’m sure if you asked Mr Nguyen at the end of assembly, he might be happy to give you,” the principal raised her eyebrows at Tom, who nodded back at her, “an autograph. Now, I think Mr Nguyen had a question for the Minister?”

“Yes thanks, Mrs Mignacca,” Tom said, “I just wanted to say that, according to the Ombudsman, a security check for the purposes of visiting a detention centre should only take a week” he paused. “I say *should*, because I’ve had my own issues getting into the centres.”

“Oh, now that is interesting,” Mrs Mignacca said, turning to Calvin. “Minister, do you know I think I’m starting to see what we here at Queanbeyan Primary like to call a ‘Super Solution’.”

“Uh?” Delahunty rubbed his temples with his index fingers.

“Why don’t *you* take Dr Carver into the detention centre? That way, if his security clearance is taking longer than it should, you can step in and well, crack some heads?”

The kids laughed.

“Take Tom Nguyen too,” someone shouted, “he cracks heads good.”

“Actually, that’s not a bad idea, Minister,” Mrs Mignacca said. “Why don’t you go with the doctor *and* take the journalists with you? I mean, if it’s not a gaol, and it’s so

comfortable and safe and all why *not* let the reporters in? They can take pictures and show everyone on the outside just how wonderful it is in there. And then *you* can stop having to tell everyone it's not a gaol."

"Look I," Delahunty spread his hands and sighed. "Much as I would *love* to just invite you all up to visit the refugees, there are certain processes to be followed—"

"Such as?" Mrs Mignacca said.

"I thought they weren't refugees?" someone called out.

Delahunty glared at Tara. "The security check, for one."

"Which only takes a week," Mrs Mignacca said.

"And there are other processes," Delahunty said.

"Such as...?" Mrs Mignacca asked.

"If the Government has nothing to hide, why won't you let journalists in to see the Centres?" Tom added.

Mrs Mignacca nodded. There was a spattering of "yeahs" and "whys" from the audience.

"Maybe you need to check with the Prime Minister, first?" Dr Carver said. "He's quite involved with Detention, yeah?"

"Look, no more than with any other portfolio," Calvin spluttered. "Now, listen, this is not a matter of me not being able to make the decision myself. *Of course* I can make it myself if I want to, and of course I want to. It would be very easy to just invite you all in for a tea party with the refugees—I mean the asylum seekers—and move on to other things, but such decisions are *not* just a matter of saying, yes."

"What are they a matter of then?" Mrs Mignacca said.

"Yeah?" said the hall.



“They’re a matter of careful—look, I’m sorry, but I think we’ve really been here longer than we scheduled for, and my assistant is telling me that we have to get to our next appointment.”

“Oh, that’s a pity,” Mrs Mignacca said. “I was hoping you might sign some autographs along with Mr Nguyen here.”

Phoebe could see Delahunty’s jaw clenching, his hands balling into fists. The primary school visit had obviously not worked out as planned. Ambushed by kids and refugee advocates and upstaged by an ex-footy star. She wondered if he’d been expecting to talk to the infants’ school. It would certainly have been wiser to have him reading stories to kindergarten. And from what she’d seen of Mrs Mignacca, Phoebe wouldn’t put it past her to let a little misunderstanding occur, make the Minister stand up to the older kids. She’d probably had a gutful of politicians using her school for photo opportunities just cause it was the closest “disadvantaged” school to Parliament.

Tara’s phone rang. She signalled to the Minister. “We’ve got to go NOW,” she said loudly.

Delahunty rose from his plastic chair. “Well thank you all for having—”

“Come on, Minister,” Mrs Mignacca said, “can’t you just agree to take Dr Carver in?”

“Yeah,” Dr Carver said.

“And the journalists?” Tom said.

“How hard can it be?” Mrs Mignacca added.

“You did that cool thing with the racist statue,” a student yelled.

Delahunty threw his hands in the air. “Look, I’ll look into it, alright?”

“He-has-to-check-with-the-Prime-Minister,” Dr Carver called out, smirking.

“I do not!” Delahunty snapped.

“Then why can you just say yes?” Tom said.

Delahunty turned to Mrs Mignacca for help.

She shrugged. “Super solutions,” she said.

“For goodness sake! I said, I’ll look into it!”

“Great news!” said Mrs Mignacca, and began to clap.

The kids followed suit, clapping loudly as Delahunty descended the stairs and waded through his cross-legged interrogators toward the cameras that had just captured his humiliation.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Calvin arrived at the airbase at 5.45am, Tara in tow. Most of the reporters were already there, stuffing their faces with free pastries and Coke and trying to work the free cappuccino machine. Journalists and freebies, Calvin thought, trying not to smirk. He watched Larissa Lipton lean over the breakfast bar and giggle at Tom Nguyen who was trying to dodge the cappuccino steam. Ahhh Larissa, thought Calvin. Stunning, flirtatious and stupid as a soap star: the perfect journalist. Next to her, that chubby girl from ABC Radio was flipping through *The Standard*, pretending to ignore the flirting. Calvin flicked his eyes around the room and spotted Phoebe Valor. She was slumped in a couch behind a gossip magazine, as though she visited detention centres every other day. The statue story had obviously gone to her head, Calvin thought. No doctor yet. With a bit of luck the bloody doctor would miss the flight. No Noora either. Now *that* was a worry. Calvin checked his watch: she was fifteen minutes late already. But surely she was coming? Apart from Valor's little blip the other week, Noora Ahmed owned the round. She wouldn't let a trip like this go by. At least not without a very good reason and any reason *that* good made Calvin very nervous.

"Noora?" he whispered to Tara.

Tara shrugged. "I told her 5.30," she said.

Phoebe sauntered over as Calvin was saying his good mornings at the coffee machine.

"Minister," she muttered, nodding at him as though they were *both* ministers.

We'll have to do something about *that*, Calvin thought. He pursed his lips. She did have lovely eyelashes when she looked down like that: lush and black against her pale skin.

There was a bit of a Snow White thing going on there. Or was it Rose Red? Not TV quality like Larissa, but still: not bad.

There was a harrummm behind Calvin and a dark-skinned airline hostess asked to see their security passes; they'd be boarding in 10 minutes. Calvin looked at the doorway again: still no Noora. The other reporters had just finished fossicking for their passes—Larissa digging temptingly between blouse buttons—when Noora finally rushed in, stinking of cigarettes, her hijab coming loose and her laptop threatening to tumble from her open backpack.

“Ah, Ms Ahmed, glad you could make it,” Calvin said, striding to meet her. “The trip just wouldn't be the same without Australia's best immigration reporter!”

Noora had recently won a gong for immigration reporting. The award was a PR stunt put on by some refugee group, so no one took it seriously. Still, none of Noora's competitors wanted to look jealous. Everyone laughed. Everyone complained that with Noora around they would actually have to do some work. Calvin allowed himself an internal giggle. Journalists were such fun!

“Sorry we're late,” a voice cut through the laughter and Calvin turned to see the English doctor breezing through the security scanner as though he owned the place, a wheezing overweight woman in his wake. Calvin fixed a smile to his face. He would *not* let this little turd upstage him again. Before Queanbeyan Primary School, Calvin had been going like the clappers. He'd been on AM eleven times and starred in thirty-seven print articles, he'd graduated to “hello” terms with the Treasurer, been invited to “drinks with the chaps” by the head of the party's parliamentary Left faction, guest starred at an Amnesty International dinner, launched two books and opened a refugee health clinic. And then he'd gone to Queanbeyan.

Calvin gritted his teeth as he watched Tara gush over Dr Carver in his slim-fit jeans and his shirt that was unbuttoned way too far. Calvin supposed he was good looking in a scruffy, boyband sort of a way. That unkempt sort of good-looking that was reserved for people who didn't have to be grown ups and work in real jobs and contribute to society.

"Hello, doctor," Calvin said, extending a hand.

"Hello, Minister," Dr Carver said. There was something about his tone that struck Calvin as mocking, arrogant. Bloody *English*, he thought. He shook the doctor's cool, firm hand and wondered, for the thousandth time, why he hadn't just shut down that bloody primary school fracas before it had gotten to this. Calvin pulled himself up by the bootstraps. It was hardly *his* fault, he reminded himself, it had been a *very* high-pressure situation with the kids and teachers and the cameras. Tara should never have organised the wretched visit in the first place. Yes, it was a good picture opportunity, but you didn't have to be on *her* salary to know kids were completely unpredictable. Not to mention the fact they'd been ambushed by that horrible excuse of a principal. He wouldn't be visiting *that* school again.

Suitor had been livid, of course. But he agreed they were trapped; if Calvin backed out of his promise, everyone would assume the government had something to hide. Suitor said they could contain the damage by restricting the visit to immigration reporters; they were more inexperienced than political correspondents, less likely to question the Government line. They'd also decided on the Central Australian Detention Centre. It was an ingenious plan: Central was a notoriously bad lock-up, landlocked by 50 kilometres of desert in all directions, but it had just got a new wing that was still in pristine condition. By showing off the best bits of detention in the worst Centre, the

Government could protect itself from charges that they were hiding anything. The finer points of whether a particular wing was indicative of a wider centre would be lost on the average punter.

After an interminable flight over a monotonous landscape, they finally landed and transferred to the bus. Had *he* planned the trip, Calvin would have landed closer to the Centre itself; the 30-minute drive only served to highlight its isolation. He watched on anxiously as the journalists stared out the bus windows in silence. Not that there was anything to see. No trees, no grass, no saltbush. Just two diverging planes—one brown, one blue—stretching off eternally. The low grey buildings of the Centre sparkled prettily when they first appeared on the skyline, and Calvin's hopes rose. But as the bus got closer, the sparkles turned out to be sunlight bouncing off the rolls of razor wire that topped the electric fence.

Still, any concerns Calvin had about what the journos made of the Centre's isolation were displaced as soon as he stepped into the demountable, aluminium box that passed for a reception centre, and saw Tara arguing with a big dyke of a Detention Officer.

"I'm saying they've already *had* their details checked by government security services," Tara told the woman, who was standing behind a high desk flanked by two small male officers: like a Mafioso and her henchmen. Calvin wondered whether the correct term was a Mafiosa, then wondered whether there was such a thing as a female mafia boss.

"Sorry, love," the woman said, looking anything but sorry. "Nobody told us nothing about that, so we'll have to see your IDs."

Tara argued with the DO for another five minutes, but The Mafiosa would not budge. The entire party, including Calvin, was made to produce their identity cards before being shunted through the X-ray, fitted with plastic wristbands and branded with an infrared-sensitive stamp. The Mafiosa ushered them outside into a tunnel covered on all sides by chicken coop wire and in which charming surrounds they had to wait until she released them via a steel gate into the rest of the tunnel, which was dissected by more gates that were open and shut behind them as they made their way through like cattle on their way to be euthanised. At the end of the tunnel was another demountable. The Mafiosa rapped on the door and a fat young officer opened it, nodded, and waved the party inside.

Calvin, Larissa, Tom, Tara and Noora made it into the glorious air-conditioning before the door was shut behind them.

“Five at a time,” the fat officer said, by way of explanation.

Calvin felt a dull sense of panic in his bowels. The last thing he needed was a whole lot of hot, grumpy journos on his hands. The *very* last thing.

Calvin pointed out that he was the Minister for Immigration. He explained that the trip had been arranged by the PM. He warned that the visitors were journalists who would report their findings to the rest of the country. He told the officer, *sotto voce*, to *open this fucking door and let them in*. But the Centre evidently doubled as one of Australia’s last sheltered workshops, because the man just stood there staring at him, his mouth hanging open.

“I can only open the door when I’ve processed the first five visitors,” Fatso said robotically, motioning a fat, pale hand towards an X-Ray.

“Oh for God’s *sake!*” Calvin muttered to himself. He adjusted his face into what he hoped was an exasperated smile and turned to face the others. “We have an *extremely* efficient and dedicated guard here,” he said. He faked a chuckle. “No one else allowed in until we’ve been *processed*.”

“But it must be 45 degrees out there!” Noora said, slapping the door behind which her colleagues were being cooked.

“Yes,” Calvin said, turning to give the DO a menacing look. “We’ll just have to be *quick*.”

But Fatso didn’t understand ‘quick’. He wasn’t happy with the first X-ray; he made them walk through twice, three times. When the buzzer still didn’t go off, he asked them to remove their shoes anyway. Calvin felt his blood pressure get higher and higher as Fatso fed their bags through a separate X-ray, opened their bags for inspection, checked their laptops and ran a hand-held wand over their persons as carefully as if they were convicted serial killers. Then he ushered them out another door into another chicken coop, where they were told to wait until the second group had been ‘processed’.

Calvin tried to think of a joke with which to re-establish his authority, but his mind was blank.

“Wow,” Larissa said. “He gets *my* vote for employee of the month.”

Calvin tried to remember if he’d applied his Clinique Ultra-protect that morning. Yes, he had. Not that it mattered, he thought, irritably: it would well and truly have worn off by now. He didn’t even have a folder to shade his face. He could *not* afford to get wrinkles and pigmentation. And he was not ready for Botox, especially after what had happened to poor Amelia. He held his forearm as a visor and tried some small talk to stop Noora from scribbling in her notebook.



“If there were more than 10 of us, would we have to wait until *every* group of five was processed?” she asked, blowing cigarette smoke in his face.

Calvin laughed off the question as if it were a joke. He couldn’t *wait* to speak to the head of the Immigration Department. He’d checked out the DO’s name badge: Walter. Calvin would love to see the look on Walter’s chubby little face when the bad news was delivered. Maybe they had CCTV in Central?

Finally, the others emerged—the sweat-drenched blouse of the woman doctor revealing the contours of a massive brassiere—and The Mafiosa led them through the tunnel into a third, much larger demountable, its long corrugated iron wall unbroken by windows and topped with a curved iron roof, which Calvin knew from earlier briefings to be a suicide prevention measure.

The Mafiosa left them alone in the Visitor’s Centre—which to Calvin’s dismay looked just like a set from a TV gaol—and bustled off to find them some bottled water. Thank God for *small* mercies, Calvin thought to himself.

“So, when can we talk to the detainees?” Phoebe demanded as soon as The Mafiosa had left.

“We’ve just *arrived!*” Tara snapped, the beads of sweat still visible on her upper lip. Calvin could see a hissy fit coming on.

“Patience, patience,” Calvin tsked, stepping in between the two women.

“I just want to make sure we’re actually going to get to speak to some of the people,” Phoebe said. “I mean, you’re going to show us where the detainees actually *live* aren’t you? Not just the new bits of the centre?”

“Yeah,” said Noora, stepping in behind Phoebe. Calvin had a flash back to the primary school.

He tried to smile. “Would you excuse us for a moment?” he said. “Tara? A word?” He led Tara away by the elbow.

“Someone’s been briefing them,” he hissed.

Tara looked at him.

“Well? Who is it?” he hissed again.

“Well *I* don’t know,” Tara hissed back.

“So, then how does Valor know we’re showing them the new bits?” Calvin said.

“I *said* I don’t know,” Tara snapped. She remembered who she was talking to and adjusted her tone. “Maybe she just guessed?”

Calvin swore under his breath. “Right, well, you’d better let *me* handle this,” he said.

He strode back to the huddle of journalists. Larissa was flirting with the doctor. Noora fiddled with an unlit cigarette.

Calvin cleared his throat. “So, it seems we *are* going to see the newer parts of the Centre—” He raised a hand to stop the protests. “However, these areas are certainly *not* unoccupied and they were the only areas for which we were able to waive security clearance at such short notice.”

Phoebe muttered something.

“What was that?” Tara snapped. Calvin put a warning hand against her lower back. This was no time for a scrag fight.

Phoebe took a step toward Tara. “I *said*: can you give us your guarantee that the areas we’re going to see are no different from the other compounds?”

“And that they haven’t been done up for our visit?” Noora added.

Calvin tried to look calm. He wasn’t surprised to hear such an outburst from Noora, but Phoebe? The statue story had definitely changed things. Or was it the doctor? Calvin had seen the sidelong glances she’d been giving Dr Carver. The way she pushed her lips out prettily whenever he passed; her new-found ‘dedication’ to the refugees.

“Oh guarantee schmarantee,” Calvin laughed. “You journalists and your rock-solid, iron-clad guarantees.” He wagged his finger at them. He sighed. “Look, Compound Alaska is broadly similar to the other compounds. Is it exactly the same? Probably not.”

Thankfully, The Mafiosa chose that exact moment to return, accompanied by a chap that looked rather like an ageing nightclub bouncer. After some brief introductions, The Mafiosa took Dr Carver and his sidekick to see the detainees who were claiming to be sick, leaving the Bouncer to give them a completely redundant ‘tour’ of the visitor’s area given the five minutes they’d been waiting had already been more than enough time to get acquainted with the room’s six bolted-down tables, its brand new plastic chairs that would be cracked and faded within two months, its two rectangular windows looking onto a “recreation courtyard” and the windowless wall that separated them from the world outside. There was a bit of a kerfuffle when Tara reminded Larissa that her camera man had to give up his camera—Channel 12 had agreed they would only film from the Visitors’ Centre and external perimeter—but she wasn’t overly bolshie. And then the Bouncer led them down the steps of the Centre and into Alaska Compound.

As soon as he stepped outside, Calvin felt claustrophobic. On one side, Alaska was separated from the next compound by a three-metre aluminium fence on top of which

razor wire rolled like surf. On the other, rows of demountable buildings—which, to the delight of Larissa and Tom, the Bouncer called “dongas”—stretched off for miles. Calvin felt like he was in a Jeffrey Smart painting denuded of the colour.

The accommodation units, dining room and education centre were much like the Visitor’s Area only accessorised differently; here it was a table bolted to the lino floor there a bunk and a desk. While they were in the education centre, Calvin made the mistake of asking what the students were taught, at which point the Bouncer informed them the Centre was, like the accommodation unit they had just seen, “not yet operational”. Noora helpfully pointed out some plastic still clinging to the whiteboard and one of the chairs. Calvin asked the Bouncer whether he hadn’t meant to say *fully* operational? The Bouncer corrected himself, but it was too late; Calvin could tell by the way they shifted about and looked at one another that the journalists didn’t buy it. He just hoped they hadn’t noted his ignorance about the Centre’s day-to-day running. Tara had thought it best if he didn’t let on he hadn’t actually *been* to Central; some people could get all het up over silly symbolic gestures like a physical visit. She had prepared him a file on the Centre and its issues—too hot, nothing to do, fighting amongst the detainees (one would have thought they’d just be thankful to be out of a warzone)—to study before the visit. But she had failed to include any photos of the place, a matter Calvin would bring up with her later.

It wasn’t until they reached the recreation centre that they saw any real-life refugees. Four men with glassy eyes played pool at a ripped billiards table. As Calvin watched on, one of the men listlessly chocked the black ball straight into the corner pocket. Calvin was about to make a joke about ‘own goals’ when he realised no one had noticed the mistake. They weren’t even seeing the balls.

The Bouncer informed them they were in an active recreation centre. Each compound had “one active and one passive recreation centre, plus two multipurpose *slash* recreation rooms, which can be used for either passive or active recreation”.

*God*, thought Calvin, where did these people learn to speak? Next door, in the passive recreation centre, two men lay sleeping or possibly comatose on the electric blue metal chairs. Obviously they had been through trauma of some kind, but Calvin did wish they could look just a little less morose. The refugees in the recreation courtyard weren’t much better. Teenage boys played soccer like they were sleepwalking while blank-eyed men and women flattened themselves along the donga walls trying to squeeze into the sliver of shade thrown by the anti-suicide roofing. Calvin could *feel* the depression in that courtyard. It was like a physical presence pressing in on him. He willed the Bouncer to speed up. He could see the health clinic, marked by its big red cross, on the other side of the courtyard. Their last stop. Thank God, Calvin thought. He was simply *longing* for the fresh chambray shirt he’d had Tara pack.

The Bouncer rapped on the clinic door, pushed it open and stuck his head in. A moment later, he re-emerged.

“You’re right to go in,” he said importantly, holding the door open.

As the reporters filed in, Calvin told them they’d just have a *quick look*; they wouldn’t want to take up valuable consultation time. Calvin was the last through the door, save Tara and the Bouncer, and he had to give Noora a little nudge to get her to make some room. He wondered vaguely whether you were allowed to do that to a Muslim girl. To Calvin’s relief, the clinic felt more cheerful than the other rooms they’d visited. Perhaps it was the cartoon posters about nose blowing and hand washing, but Calvin barely noticed the chicken wire covering the windows. Just inside the door, Dr

Sam was sitting with a small boy and girl dressed for winter in dark, Middle-Eastern looking clothes. The three of them sat on plastic chairs squeezed in between a white-sheeted hospital bed and a formica desk. Behind the bed, there was a murmuring curtain.

“Jen-ny?” Dr Sam yelled to the ceiling. The curtain fell silent. “The minister and his troops are here for a tour ... Cool?”

The curtain grunted. Calvin saw the girl quickly lower her head and swipe at her cheeks with a black sleeve. She was tanned. Green eyes. Awfully good looking, he thought. Was that Hazara? She and her brother looked a bit like that famous *National Geographic* photo of the Afghani girl with the beautiful eyes. Tara should have included photos of the different racial groups in his study file. Calvin made another mental note to have a word or two with Tara as soon as they were alone. He wouldn’t make it a formal complaint. At this stage.

“So,” Dr Sam said, twisting in his chair to address the group clumped just inside the clinic door. “Let me introduce you all.”

Calvin smoothed his hair and set his jaw. Who made *Dr Sam* host?

Dr Sam gestured toward the girl, “*This* is 6457, he said. Calvin grimaced. “And this,” Dr Sam pointed to the boy, “this is 6458...Oh no. Hang on. That’s not right, is it?”

The girl shook her head. Dr Sam grinned, no doubt for the benefit of the female contingent, Calvin thought.

“Sorry. *This*,” the doctor pointed at the boy, “is 6457 and *this* is 6458.”

Cute, thought Calvin, the little I-mixed-up-the-name game was just a tad obvious, wasn’t it? It got worse. Dr Sam then informed them that Mohammad hadn’t spoken for the past two months with, Calvin noted, *complete* disregard for doctor-patient privilege. He said the children had been in the centre for over *three* months and still hadn’t seen a

lawyer. And then, just as Calvin had almost managed to get the journos out of the damn clinic, Dr Sam grabbed at Calvin's arm. Calvin wondered how much the government was paying "security experts" to let in activists like this entitled little turd.

"Halani—*sorry*, 6458—wanted to give you this drawing her brother did," Dr Sam said. He handed Calvin a sheet of dirty, creased paper. Calvin ground his teeth as he felt the journos jostle for position around him.

The drawing was just like something Caspar, his four-year-old would do: circles with legs and arms coming straight out of their heads, a 'house' made out of a square with a triangle on top. But in *this* picture two of the stick figures were lying under red scribbled blankets. And off to the side—Oh *God*, thought Calvin—there was another stick figure holding what had to be a gun. He heard Larissa gasp. Calvin looked up and caught Tara's eye. What should he say? Should he say anything? It wasn't *his* fault: the drawing was *obviously* of Afghanistan, so it wasn't like it could reflect badly on the Government...

"It's a family portrait," Dr Sam said, his posh voice all irony. "Of Halani and Mohammad's family. Their dad ran a school, but wrong type of school, apparently, so the Taliban shot he and his wife. Halani and Mohammad went to their aunty who sent them to friends in Pakistan, but it was dangerous there too, so their aunty sent them to Australia."

"Right, right," said Calvin quickly. "Must go now. We'll wait for you outside, doc." He turned awkwardly to the little boy. "Thank you for the lovely ... Well, for the drawing."

As soon as they got outside, the journalists rushed to the refugees. Valor was the first to break, but not by much. Tara reminded them they'd agreed to speak only with

Government approved detainees; she warned them she'd have their security clearances permanently revoked. But they were like school kids on a windy day: it was anarchy. Dictaphones extended, scribbling in notepads, they ran from person to person: the boys playing soccer, the people lining the dongas, the old women knitting. Calvin tried to keep calm as snippets of their questions floated over on the dry air: how long have you been here? Where are you from? Where is your family? What's it like in here?

Behind him, a door slammed. Dr Sam emerged from the clinic, led by his young patients. Calvin looked on as the doctor ruffled Mohammad's hair then crouched down on his haunches to give him a hug. He watched as the doctor respectfully shook the girl's hand; put a comforting hand on her slim shoulder. God, thought Calvin, what a performance. He hastened over.

"How did you go, doc?" he asked Dr Sam, as the kids disappeared into a donga on the other side of the courtyard.

The doctor seemed to look him up and down. Subtly. "Fine, thank you," he said.

*Turd*, Calvin thought and slapped the doctor's back. "Must be about whisky o'clock eh?"

Meanwhile, Tara had managed, with the help of two guards, to herd the journalists away from the detainees. The group began to walk back along the concrete path towards the Visitor's Centre. They made slow progress: the journalists scribbled in notebooks as they dawdled, trying to get down all the colour they could. For all their lefty, friend-of-the-underdog posturing, they used people just as mercilessly as politicians, Calvin thought. A life here, a life there, all of it fodder for a Walkley or to make some hack feel worthy of the ridiculous 'I'm-a-foreign-correspondent' neck scarf they all wore.



Calvin's thoughts were broken by a short, strangled yelp. There was a flutter of black at the edge of his vision. Then everything happened at once. Dr Sam was sprinting across the courtyard. Dr Jenny was yelling at the DOs, grabbing Sam's medical bag from where it had dropped and running after him. Larissa was calling out to someone.

"Oh. *Fuck*," Noora said in slow motion as Calvin's brain began to catch up with what he was seeing. The Hazara girl lay crumpled on the hard dry ground. Something blazed in her right hand. A piece of glass, Calvin thought in wonderment. A small red light flickered in the window of the Visitor's Centre and Calvin realised Larissa's cameraman was no longer with the group. He was in the Visitor's Room, getting his government-approved footage. Calvin watched horrified as the light flickered. It flickered as the guards left the detainees in front of the clinic and circled the bloodied girl like slow moving sharks. It flickered as it trained in on an officer wielding a Taser gun. It flickered as that horrible dyke woman, The Mafiosa, took the glass out of the girl's hand, as she and another guard hauled the girl up by the underarms and dragged her away past her brother, who looked on with wide eyes. And it flickered as the young girl twisted in the guard's arms, and shouted over her shoulder at Calvin.

"Please help us, Sir," she cried. "My brother he will die in here. Please bring lawyer. Please—" But the guards had dragged her into one of the dongas, and once the door was closed, Calvin couldn't remember which one. Then the other detainees were peeling themselves off the donga walls and running towards the journalists, shouting, pleading. Calvin felt sick. It was the perfect piece of television.

Suitor rang as they were boarding the plane. Calvin hung back on the tarmac to take the call.

“I don’t know *who* organised this trip for you,” Calvin said briskly, having decided that attack was his best chance of escaping relatively unscathed. “The staff weren’t briefed, the refugees hadn’t been warned about speaking to the journalists, there was a girl who cut herself in front of the bloody cameras—”

“Slow down,” Suitor said, menacingly.

Neanderthal, Calvin thought. He cracked his neck. “I’m *telling* you, Suitor, it was a complete debacle. Snafu after snafu. We’re going to be complete toast in the press. They’ve got some really bad stuff.”

“Right,” said Suitor, slowly, and Calvin knew he was in big trouble. “You’d better fill me in from the beginning.”

Calvin stood for a moment on the tarmac, the sun pulsing down on him like the headache he would soon have, the journalists staring from the plane. He should never have agreed to this stupid bloody visit. He should never have believed Suitor when he said they could control it. He should have visited the bloody Centre *himself* before now. *My brother he will die in here.* Halani’s green eyes looked up at him from the tarmac. His heart lurched. Oh *God*. Could he really die in there? That beautiful little boy with his stick figures just like Casper’s? Calvin shook his head; he didn’t have time to think like this. He shooed the girl away and began to tell Suitor what he would be seeing on the evening news.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Phoebe stared out the smudged perspex of the plane's window and tried to come up with a lead. The news itself—of the Minister's interrupted visit—would be old by the time the paper came out. Still, the promise of more grisly detail, a blow-by-blow account of a suicide attempt, guaranteed a large readership. Phoebe tried to ignore her own excitement over the grisly details. She told herself she was merely excited by the feeling of purpose; she was informing her readers of a terrible thing happening right under their very noses. She tried to keep from her conscious mind the fact that before Halani had cut herself, she'd been hoping for something bad to happen, *hoping* for a story. When she'd first seen the Centre it seemed as though she were about to enter one of the last untouched places on earth. The posts of its "external perimeter" seemed to stretch on and on, until they got so small you could space your thumb and forefinger a few centimetres apart and pretend to hold one in your hand. *Here* would be fresh news, Phoebe had thought. *Here* would be events and people that hadn't already been served and re-served with ever diminishing originality; things that readers didn't already know about, things that she, Phoebe Esther Valor, could tell them. And the light-bending, sound-swallowing, escape-preventing heat of the place seemed to promise not just worthy stories, but the kind of shocking news that was sure to dominate the front page. She'd made a note to find out how long the heat would take to kill a person.

But despite such early promise, the Centre had turned out to be a disappointment, story-wise. Phoebe did get a bad vibe from the place—a gaol vibe—but the rooms they toured were brand new and spotless. There were TVs and a pool table and a children's playground in the courtyard. There were no scorpions or snakes, no wild-eyed grief-

crazed people wandering about. Yes, security was tight: the tables and chairs and beds were bolted to the floor, and the TV cords wound out of sight to stop people topping themselves. But how did you make a story out of a lack of scenery, heat, and some bolted down household items? With every opening par that occurred to her, Damien's voice echoed in Phoebe's head, *bit dry, isn't it?* She needed some human drama.

It wasn't that she wanted the detainees to be worse off than they already were. It was just that, just that ... She tried to articulate it to herself: it was only that she wanted the horror of their existence to be manifest, in a reportable form. It was only then that she could share it, and do something about it.

*Really?* The sneering voice seemed to come from somewhere deep inside Phoebe's chest, from the knot that had been there ever since Halani had cut herself. Was that really the only reason she was drawn to the most gruesome newspaper stories, the most graphic pictures of suffering? Yes, Phoebe told herself sharply, that really was the reason. And yet ... and yet, she couldn't help feeling ashamed that she had craned her neck to see the picture Mohammad had drawn, ashamed that at the same time as she'd felt bad for him she'd sort of felt elated too, like she'd had a shot of a drug. She hated that the sick feeling she'd had when she saw the blood seeping from Halani's arm, when she saw Mohammad's big, baby eyes filled with terror, was of a kind indistinguishable from excitement. Phoebe told herself that the other journalists had craned their necks too. They had all felt the same way. It was just reporter's instinct.

"Mind if I sit here?" An English voice brought Phoebe back to the plane. The doctor, Sam, was standing next to the aisle seat, his dirty blonde fringe flopping in one eye.

“Of course,” she said. “I mean, of course *not* ... of course I don’t mind.” Actually, Phoebe thought, she *did* mind. She was already anxious about getting her story done in time and worrying about what she would say next or whether or not she looked wrinkly would not help the situation. Plus, he’d hardly acknowledged her existence before now. When he’d got on the plane that morning he’d ignored the empty seat next to Phoebe and squeezed onto the bench seat between Tara and Larissa.

Phoebe heaved her backpack off the aisle seat and shoved it under her own.

“Smuggling someone out?” he asked.

Phoebe ha-ha’d then made a show of studying her notebook. Sam sat, his dark, well fitting jeans exhaling a puff of red dust. She tried to think of something to break the awkward silence.

“So...was everyone alright?” she asked finally.

Sam looked at her like she was an idiot. “You mean the detainees?” he asked.

“Were the detainees alright?”

“I meant,” Phoebe said, trying to think of a way to explain.

Sam didn’t give her the chance. “Well, now, let’s see. I’m *pretty* sure that Mohammad has post traumatic stress disorder,” he counted off his finger. “And now you’ve got Halani needing stitches and suicide watch. Oh, and *then* there’s the kid that tried to sew his lips together, *not* to mention the cases of depression, psychosis and refusal to eat. So, hmmm, are they alright? I would say.... Ummm,” he looked at the roof theatrically, “probably, I’d say, no.”

Phoebe’s cheeks flamed. “That’s not what I meant,” she said.

“Oh,” Sam said. “*I’m* sorry. What *did* you mean?”

“You know, I just meant ... I meant,” Phoebe couldn’t say what she meant, only that she didn’t mean what Sam said she did.

“Right,” Sam said. He turned his back to her and looked over to where Larissa was having a tête-à-tête with her cameraman. Phoebe turned to the window, so he couldn’t see her red cheeks.

Phoebe heard voices over the rumbling of the warming engines, and looked up to see Delahunty gesticulating at Tara. Sweat bloomed across the back of his chambray shirt. He and Tara were clearly arguing and you didn’t have to be a genius to work out the subject. Phoebe almost felt sorry for him. But when the hostess emerged from the cockpit and directed the pair to sit down, Delahunty seemed to shed his sweaty, argumentative demeanour. He straightened and asked the hostess, loudly, what a man had to do to get a whisky around here? Phoebe preferred the earlier Calvin.

Once she’d got Delahunty seated, the hostess announced they were about to take off and asked everyone to switch off their phones and laptops. It was only then that Phoebe noticed every other journo was on a phone except for her.

“Nah, *nah* mate.” Tom Nguyen, sitting in front of Phoebe, was arguing with someone. “Look, I gotta go. We’re refuelling in Alice. I’ll call you then. Nah, don’t worry. It’s no worries mate ... Yep, yep.” He sighed loudly. “*Wanker*,” he said. Noora, sitting next to him, laughed. Her phone call was already over.

The chattering petered out. Soon, only Larissa was still talking.

“No, I’m sorry, but I want top spot for this,” she said and Phoebe could almost hear the high-heeled little feet stomping under her chair. “Because you haven’t seen the vision we’ve got, Mal. I’m telling you it’s—”

The hostess politely told Larissa she would need to end her call; the plane was about to take off. Larissa held up a finger.

“Just *wait*, can’t you?” she snapped.

Phoebe could feel Sam chuckle next to her. In spite of herself, she too was impressed by Larissa’s bolshiness.

The hostess explained, firmly, that they had to leave *now* or else they would all miss their deadlines. Plus, they would be breaching aviation laws. So she was sorry, but Madam would have to turn her phone off *now*.

*Madam*, Phoebe smiled to herself.

“Fine!” Larissa snapped, “I *said* fine!” Her finger went up again. “Mal, I’ve got to go, this fu—this bureaucrat here is completely up my arse. But look, I am telling you if you don’t put this story first you’re going to regret it, everyone else will—*fuck!*” It seemed Mal had had enough of Larissa’s threats. “It’s off,” Larissa waved her phone at the hostess, who looked supremely unruffled.

As the plane trundled too slowly down the too-short runway and jerked its way up over the unending desert, Phoebe worried. Why had all the other journos had been on the phone? Had she missed something? Or was she not pushing the story hard enough? Of course, the radio and TVs had earlier deadlines, so they *had* to ring in ... but what about Tom and Noora?

“You know, by the way, that the tour they gave you was bullshit.” Sam said.

“What?” Phoebe peered through the crack in the seats in front to see if Noora was writing. Not that it made much difference, she thought. Even if Noora wasn’t writing, she was thinking about what she would write. What could she be thinking about writing?

“Those accommodation suites,” Sam used his fingers for quotation marks, “are like the bloody Taj Mahal compared to the places people are actually living in.”

“Oh. Did you see the accommodation suites?” Phoebe said, still trying to catch a glimpse of Noora’s fingers.

“No, but I’ve been told about them,” Sam said. “*En suites?* I can absolutely guarantee you that no other bedroom in that entire place has an en suite—except maybe the guards’ quarters.”

“Well, maybe they’re planning to build those for everyone,” Phoebe said, giving up on Noora.

Sam snorted. “Yeah, right. Do you *really* think that?”

“I don’t know,” Phoebe said. “But they wouldn’t build them at all if they weren’t planning on some of the detainees using them.”

“I can see Delahunty made a good investment bringing you along,” Sam said.

Phoebe felt like she’d been slapped. “*Excuse me?*”

Sam shrugged.

Phoebe struggled for words. “Actually?” she said, trying not to raise her voice.

“My interest is reporting the truth. Which means cutting through the propaganda,” she looked at him, “from both sides”.

Sam raised his eyebrows.

“Which means that I’m not a government stooge just because I don’t buy your line, hook, line and—” She’d got the saying wrong.

“There’s one problem with that argument,” Sam looked over at Larissa.

He could at least have the decency to *look* at her, Phoebe thought. “And what’s that?” she said.



“The propaganda from my side isn’t propaganda. It’s the truth.”

“Oh yes, of course—”

“But I can see why you’d prefer to take the government seriously,” he said.

“Easier, more benefits—”

Phoebe was winded. He was accusing her of being...of being, she didn’t even know what.

“You are an arrogant, rude—” Phoebe spluttered out. She wasn’t used to fighting. She didn’t know any insults.

Sam sighed, completely unaffected. “Yes. I am. And yet I’m not the one calling these little kids queue jumpers and locking them up.”

“Oh and *I* am?” Phoebe snapped. Across the aisle, Tara craned her neck around and gave them a look.

Sam ignored her. “What about that headline today about Australia getting swamped by “illegals”?” He did the quotation marks with his fingers.

Phoebe had seen the headline: in the *Daily Mail*. “Yes,” she snapped, “that wasn’t my paper”.

“So *your* paper...Sorry, I’ve forgotten the name...” Sam spread his hands.

Phoebe had told him just a few hours ago. And it wasn’t like the *Trib* was some pissant little rag. He’d probably been too busy laughing at Larissa’s jokes to listen properly.

“*The Sydney Tribune*,” she said stiffly.

“*The Sydney Tribune*...” Sam said. “...wouldn’t use those words?”

“No, actually. It wouldn’t,” Phoebe said. Her face was hot. “At least, not unless the context demanded it.” She had become a journalist to change things. That was why

she did the bloody job, for ... *social justice* and here was this ... this *pants man* accusing her of being one of the bad guys. She couldn't believe she'd actually thought he was cool.

"Well that's comforting to know," Sam said. He grinned: a morally superior, NGO-person's grin. "I'm glad you use your power for good."

Phoebe started reading through her notes. Sam didn't take the hint.

"So, was there anyone actually *living* in the part of the Centre they showed you today?" he asked.

"Look," Phoebe snapped. "I don't have time to just ... get preached at. I have to write a story. Why don't you go talk to Larissa?"

"OK," Sam said, getting up. "Will do."

Phoebe panicked. What if Sam had a story and he gave it to someone else?

"Sorry," she said. "Look, I'm sorry. I'm feeling a bit stressed. It's fine if you want to ... well, preach at me."

Sam dragged a hand over his face and the long deep wrinkles at the corners of his eyes stretched into white lines. For a moment, he looked vulnerable. Different to the arrogant, arrogant ... *so-and-so* who'd spent the day flirting with Larissa.

"Do you know her well?" Sam asked suddenly. He nodded his head in Larissa's direction.

Phoebe started. Had she been staring at Larissa? "Nope. Not really," she said, trying to sound casual. "But I think she has a partner, if that's what you mean." Phoebe felt herself flush.

Sam's lips twisted in a grin and he pushed his fringe out of his face. "She *is* hot," he said. "But no, that's not what I meant."

"Oh," said Phoebe, determined not to offer anything more.

“I was just interested in her political views,” Sam said.

“Right,” said Phoebe.

“She’s right-wing?” Sam asked.

“No, I’m not sure. I meant right as in, OK.”

“Oh, right,” he said. “So ... do you know what they are? Her political views?”

Irritated, Phoebe wondered how Sam had categorised *her*. “I would assume that whatever her views are, she would report on today’s incidents objectively,” she said. “Just like the rest of us.”

“Oh yes of course!” Sam lifted his finger, “the famous journalistic objectivity. Apologies. My mistake.”

Phoebe smiled at him sarcastically and wondered how someone who helped refugees could be such an asshole.

“You can go and sit next to someone else now if you want,” she said. “You’ve probably got other stories to try and spin.”

Sam shrugged, but stayed where he was.

Phoebe scribbled in shorthand, so that Sam couldn’t tell what she was writing. She’d make a bet that Sam wouldn’t see *Larissa* writing in shorthand. After the silence went on too long, Phoebe got nervous and broke.

“Is that normal, you know, what that little girl—Halani—did?” she said. “I mean, not normal—”

“I know what you mean,” Sam said, not unkindly. He sighed. “It’s not like it happens every day, but it’s not *ab*normal either. I’ve heard of so many attempted suicides ... I can’t even remember how many.” He looked at Phoebe. The sunlight clung to the

fair hairs on his brown forearm. There was a patch of eczema around his thumb. It was raw, cracked with dried blood. Real.

“Actually though it’s the non-dramatic stuff—the stuff a visitor wouldn’t even notice—that’s really appalling. Like ... did you see the old women knitting in the courtyard today?”

Phoebe nodded, lying.

“One of our sources told us they never actually *make* anything. As soon as they finish whatever it is they’re knitting they just unravel it and start knitting something else, or the same thing, again ... Just for something to do.” He shook his head. “It’s so fucked up.”

“But surely someone can bring them some more wool?” Phoebe asked.

He looked at her until Phoebe felt like an idiot.

“But that’s not the point,” she mumbled.

Sam looked across her, out the window. Phoebe was suddenly aware of holding in her stomach.

“You know,” Sam nodded at something on the other side of the window. “I only took this job because I thought it would be an easy way to get paid and see a bit of Australia”.

“Oh,” said Phoebe.

“And I’ve seen *quite* a bit. More than enough, really.”

The plane tilted back towards the desert and the afternoon sun glared at Phoebe through the porthole window. The pilot announced they were beginning their descent into Alice Springs to refuel and let Sam and Jenny off. They had more do-gooding to get done,

remote doctoring of some kind. Phoebe could finally get on with writing her story. She might even have time for a glass of wine after she finished. Still, talking to the doctor hadn't been a complete waste of time. She had some good colour for her yarn.

When the plane had landed, Phoebe watched as Sam said his farewells. Delahunty's manicured hand looked girlish in his calloused paw. For a moment, Phoebe thought Sam wasn't even going to bother saying goodbye to her, when he turned back and leant down, hands on the armrests on either side of her, his face in hers. Phoebe shivered accidentally.

"Send me your story, OK?" he said in her ear, pressing a piece of paper into her hand.

Phoebe waited until the plane was cruising again and the others busy typing before she opened her hand and unravelled Sam's piece of paper. On the back of his boarding pass, in blue biro and terrible handwriting, was his phone number and email address.

Delahunty had promised to give each of the journalists a short interview on the final leg of the flight. As the plane climbed away from Alice, Tara informed them of the running order. Radio and TV had earlier deadlines, so they would be first. Then Tom, Noora and Phoebe. Tara didn't give an explanation for why Phoebe was last, not that Phoebe needed one: Tara was punishing her for being the first to break ranks back at the detention centre. Well, thought Phoebe, Tara could kiss her butt-cakes.

Two hours later, Phoebe was not feeling so defiant. The other interviews had all run over and she was sure she was going to miss her slot. When she worked up the courage to ask whether there would be time for all the interviews, Tara simply shrugged

and said she'd just have to hope that Tom and Noora didn't take too long. By the time her turn did come around, Phoebe was in a panic. The colour story she'd been planning to write had seemed respectable earlier that afternoon. Not anymore. The "minister's visit takes deadly turn" angle would be completely used up by tomorrow and nothing Phoebe wrote could compete with that evening's TV footage (which would be on *every* channel since Channel 12 had to pool its footage to get on the trip). Damien would cut the crap out of her story, take out any actual *writing* and run it as a single anorexic column somewhere beyond page 8 and Sam would think she was a useless hack ... Unless, Phoebe thought, unless she could just get something extra, some little break, that none of the others had ... If she could just get something to take the story forward, something with its own momentum ...

"Ah, the frank and fearless Phoebe Valor," Delahunty said as Phoebe finally dropped into the bench seat beside him.

Tara was sitting opposite. "You were out of control today," she said steadily. "And just to let you know? I'll be making a complaint to Hen."

Phoebe looked at Delahunty, who grinned and winked. Still playing good cop, she thought.

"Just doing my job," Phoebe muttered and flipped open her notebook. "So ... Minister," she said. "Some dramatic scenes today ..." she paused hopefully.

Delahunty took a sip of his whisky, watching her warily over the rim of his glass. He lowered the drink, let it rest on his thigh and licked his lips so they glistened with spit. Phoebe fought a shudder. She flicked on her Dictaphone. But he didn't bite.

She tried again. "Do you think that children should be living in an environment where they can witness violence and, as we saw today, copy it?"

“Well, Phoebe,” Delahunty said, his eyes darting over to Tara. “As I understand it, today’s incident, while regrettable, s’extremely rare, so I don’ think your question is really relev—”

“Hypothetically speaking, then,” Phoebe said, “do you think that children should be in a place—*any* place—where they can witness frequent violence or trauma?”

“No-o-o,” Delahunty rubbed at his eye. It was drooping. His pink shiny skin was flushed with the combined effects of altitude and whisky. “Course I done want lil children to see violence. But we could be talking ‘bout Afghanistan, couldn’ we? Because as I said they wouldn’ be winessing anything in the Centre.”

“*Anything?*” asked Phoebe.

“Maybe something ... sometimes...” Delahunty swallowed a yawn.

“If they *were* though,” Phoebe went on, “witnessing violence that is, ... you wouldn’t be comfortable with letting children stay there?”

Delahunty nodded and, eyes half closed, took another sip of his drink.

“And what would you consider to be an unacceptable level of violence for them to be wit—”

“That’s a totally irrelevant question,” Tara snapped from across the aisle.

“No, it’s not,” Phoebe shot back. “He—the Minister said he wouldn’t want children in a violent place, so I’m just trying to ascertain what he would define as a violent plac—”

“No, you’re not,” Tara snarled. “You’re trying to trap him like you did with the statue—” she stopped herself. “Anyway, whatever, Phoebe, I’m not getting into an argument with you on this. It’s a completely hypothetica—”

“I’m not trying to trap him,” Phoebe said, as evenly as she could. “But if you don’t want your Minister to answer the question, I *can* just write that he declined to comment.”

“That’s blackmail,” Tara spat.

Phoebe shrugged. “No, Tara. It’s the truth. Either the Minister answers the question or he declines to.” Phoebe turned to Delahunty again. “Minister?”

“Phoebe, Phoebe,” he said, patting her on the thigh. She jerked her leg away. “Why r’you being so tough on me? An’ after I gave you tha great story bout the stachew?”

“I’m not being tough on you,” Phoebe tried to smile. “I’m just keeping you on your toes.”

He waggled his finger at her. “Naughty, naughty—” he trailed off, took another sip of his drink.

“But Minister,” Phoebe tried to look serious now. “It was just that it struck me back there that you were quite touched by that Afghani girl and her brother—”

“Harr-ani,” the Minister muttered. “Lovely eyes. Terrible, terrible.”

“And, well, I know you’re a compassionate man and so ...and so I just wondered whether you would consider speeding up their visa application, you know, to get them out of the Cent—”

“PHOEBE!” Tara pounced out of her seat. Delahunty waved her help away.

“Sorry bout her,” he said, winking. “Very loyal to her minister.” He patted Phoebe on the thigh again. She tried not to flinch.

“So ... would you consider speeding up the application?” she said, trying to bring him back to the topic.



Delahunty looked at her. “Well, I couldn’ do that ... it would be unfair ... splaying God.”

“But you’re not denying you have the power to *look* at their case?” Phoebe said.

“No-o-o,” said Delahunty, slowly.

“I mean, as the *Minister*, you can speed up the asylum process. You can even grant someone special dispensation to stay here.”

“The Press Council will hear about this,” Tara hissed, her red face highlighting the dark roots in her blonde hair. “And I seriously doubt that our office will deal with you after today ... or any other office, once they hear about how unethical—”

“Tara! Tara!” Delahunty laughed from his safe, alcoholic cocoon, “Phoebe’s just doing her job ...” he gestured at Phoebe to go on.

“Thank you, Minister,” she said. “Just to clarify? I’m not asking whether you *will* let Halani go ... just whether you’ll consider using your special powers in this case,” Phoebe could see Tara’s fists clench.

“I...I,” he began.

“Calvin,” Tara entreated the Minister, “Phoebe’s had more interview time than any of the others ... And we’re about to land.”

“It’s my last question,” Phoebe said, getting up. “Would you consider it?”

Delahunty looked up at her quizzically, his whisky glass tipping precariously.

“Cal—Minister,” Tara begged, “It’s a hypothetical—”

“Tara!” Delahunty snapped. “*Please* remember which of us is the Minister.”

“Using your special powers?” Phoebe asked again.

“*’sider* it,” Delahunty muttered, looking confused. “Oh, yes, ‘sider everything really. Everything. Thas my job.”

It was 7.32pm when the plane touched down in Canberra. Phoebe's story was already written; all she had to do was send it. And it was still early enough to make front page of the first edition.

## CHAPTER SIX

Phoebe needed a coffee. Badly. She had a foggy head; the after effects of her last-minute big story and the sleepless hours she'd spent going over and over it in her head, line by line, trying to convince herself there was no way Delahunty could complain. It was not unlike a hangover, this foggy-headed feeling, right down to the accompanying anxiety. She felt as though she was just about to be sprung for doing something wrong. She needed a coffee, but she wasn't ready to brave the parliamentary cafe; she didn't want to see Noora or Larissa or Tom. They might ask her questions about how *she'd* got her story, given they'd all been on the plane. Phoebe told herself to stop it. She'd got the story fairly and squarely. It was her *job* to get the Minister to answer questions without his own spin on them. And the fact that he was drunk? Was that her fault? Did it make what he said untrue? It wouldn't be the first time a Minister said something while drunk. Phoebe tsked herself. This ridiculous moralising was just the reason she wasn't on the front page more often. She spent too much time worrying over the validity of what she was reporting rather than just reporting. That wasn't her job at all. Imagine a journalist trying to work out whether or not it was fair to quote a Minister if you suspected what they said wasn't true? Larissa and Tom would never have these kinds of compunctions. They'd just write the story, bag the front page, move on.

Even so, Phoebe couldn't face the coffee shop. She caught the lift to the press gallery on level 2 and walked quickly down the maroon-carpeted corridor to the *Trib's* bureau, praying she wouldn't bump into anyone who'd read her story. It was 10.47am. She hadn't slept in. In fact, she'd been awake since before 6am, but she'd stayed home in case Tara called. If Phoebe was going to get a bollocking, she wanted to get it at home,

not in the Bureau where Matilda and Hen could overhear it. But now it was almost lunchtime and still no phone call. Which meant Tara knew Phoebe's story was legitimate. Phoebe had the quotes. She had the tape. Tara couldn't get her on anything.

The Bureau's receptionist, Gloria, was flipping through a magazine behind the chest-high partition-cum-bar over which she and her friends drank endless cups of tea and swapped Bureau gossip. Their's was not the idle gossip of receptionists in other professions; good switchies were highly prized resources in the gallery. Phoebe had lost count of the number of times Gloria had been cited in a political story under the moniker of a "well placed source".

"Morning," Phoebe said, hanging her coat on the battered bamboo hat-stand just inside the door.

"Phoebe!" Gloria said, holding up a finger. "Messages." She fossicked a moment and handed Phoebe a wad of yellow Post-it notes.

Phoebe's stomach clenched. She flicked through the notes as fast as she could, trying to decipher Gloria's scrawl: *pls call Damien; Press Club re: lunch fri; Bec, Library; dr someone??? talks too fast.*

Phoebe sighed, her stomach unclenched. There was nothing from Tara. Nothing from Delahunty. Everything was OK. She thanked Gloria then dumped her bag on her desk, gathered up a stack of papers and newspapers and deposited them on the growing pile next to her chair. There were no filing cabinets in the Bureau. No bookshelves except for the ones above the desks of the senior reporters and correspondents, which lined two of the Bureau's four walls. Phoebe and Matilda shared the bank of desks in the middle of the tiny office together with a research assistant and a nervous young cadet.

"Hi, Matilda," Phoebe said to the Prada glasses.

Matilda didn't look up. She sucked her braces loudly.

Behind Matilda, Hen was spreadeagled in his chair, phone receiver cradled between his ear and shoulder. He saluted Phoebe.

"Yup," he barked. "Fuck you too, amigo!" He guffawed. Hung up.

"Phoebe!" he barked. "Yarn, mate! YA-A-A-A-ARRRRRN! Nice one."

"Thanks, Hen," Phoebe said, trying to stay cool.

"Noora's in big trouble over your scoop," Hen laughed. "Perser's on the fucking war path."

"Oh," Phoebe said. She felt bad. She didn't want Noora to be in trouble. *The Standard's* editor, Chris Perser, was scary.

"Yeah, well," Hen barked again, turning back to his computer, "nice one, Valor."

Phoebe thought she saw Matilda stick a finger in her mouth. She sat down and switched on her computer. As it took its time warming up, she leafed through her phone messages again. She'd call Damien after she got a coffee; she felt ready for the café now. She'd email the press club about Friday. And she was seeing Bec later; whatever she had to say could wait until then.

Phoebe flipped to the last note. *Doctor someone???* She stared at Gloria's scrawl. Oh.

Phoebe waited until Gloria had finished her phone call. It was hard to tell with the headset; Gloria didn't even take it off to go to the toilet, just unplugged it from the phone and let the cord trail along after her.

"Gloria?" she asked finally.

"Yep?" Gloria answered, still scrawling on a piece of paper.

"I was just wondering," Phoebe got up and walked over to Gloria's bar. She lowered her voice. "The doctor that rang?"

“Oh, him,” Gloria said, looking up. “Charming man. *Refused* to speak more slowly. *Wouldn’t* leave a number.” She reached for a sweet from the jar of jellies she kept on the bar.

“Oh,” Phoebe said, rolling her eyes in sympathy. “He didn’t happen to have an English accent, did he?”

“Why yes, he did,” Gloria said, adopting the accent herself to demonstrate. “How *did* you guess? And not just English daahhling, *Queen’s* English.” She grabbed another sweet.

“Ah,” Phoebe said, trying to laugh, her chest tight. “Yes. I know who *that* is. Thanks Gloria.”

“I wouldn’t bother calling *him* back,” Gloria said, chewing.

Phoebe nodded and darted back to her desk before Gloria could notice her red face. Sam had called. Not that Phoebe was interested that way. He was attractive, of course. But arrogant. Too good-looking for his own good, as Phoebe’s mother would say. Well, not exactly good-looking; his nose was too big, for one thing, and his lips. He was sexy rather good-looking. Anyway, Phoebe shook her head, she didn’t *care* how he looked, the fact was, he was an important refugee advocate and *he’d* called *her*: that meant he’d seen her story. He was courting her, professionally speaking. She bit the corner of her lip to vanquish a smile.

Two pm the next day, Phoebe was waiting at the parliamentary coffee shop, trying to concentrate on *The Standard’s* political pages. She’d read the opening par of a story on superannuation at least five times. She wondered if her breath smelt OK; she’d already had two coffees. She told herself she should have brushed her teeth. Then she

told herself it didn't matter if she had coffee breath. She started the super story a sixth time, this time reading aloud under her breath, as if that would help it sink in.

"Feeeeeeeebeeeeee Valor!" Phoebe cringed inwardly at the wheezy voice behind her. Ruth Lopes.

"Hi, Senator!" Phoebe said, pulling herself out of her chair. She returned the Senator's air kiss.

"What's happening?" the Senator said, peering around Phoebe as though she had someone hidden behind her back. "Great yarn today. Any more good stories coming up?"

"No," Phoebe said. "Just meeting someone for coffee." She wondered if Ruth Lopes was *ever* in her office or just circled eternally, from one cafe table to the next, breaking the pattern only to adjourn to the Senate Courtyard for a smoke.

"Anyway, if you ever need a comment," the Senator pointed to her own ample chest, "the head of the human rights committee is only *too* happy to oblige. You know where to find me."

Yep, thought Phoebe: the coffee shop. She smiled at the Senator.

"Keep up the good fight, sister," Senator Lopes said, raising her fist freedom-fighter style.

Phoebe fought an urge to grab the Senator's fist and bite it. She felt a hand on her shoulder, turned, and promptly tripped over her own foot.

A strong arm stopped her from falling to the floor. It was Sam.

"You wouldn't be falling all over me, would you?" he grinned. Phoebe tried to right herself. He was still holding her arm. Standing a bit too close. Phoebe took a step back.

“Oh hello, docto— Sam,” she stuttered. “Sorry,” she waved her arm to indicate the floor, the falling: her clumsiness.

“Oh, no bother at all,” he said, still grinning. “Sorry I’m late.”

“No, not at all, I’m sorry I—” Phoebe suddenly realised *she* was apologising for *him* being late. She stopped herself. Senator Lopes was still standing there, wheezing, waiting for an introduction.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said. “So Sam, this is Senator Ruth Lopes. Senator Lopes this is Sam Carter, he’s a doctor with Doctors for Refugees.”

As Senator Lopes told Sam about her role as the head of the Senate Committee on Human Rights and outlined the future directions in which she planned to take said committee, Phoebe collected herself. She had to stop apologising. *She* had the power here, not him. *He* had asked to see *her*. She was the journalist; he was just another advocate trying to get his view into the media.

Finally, Senator Lopes waddled off into the courtyard.

Sam raised his eyebrows. “Is she important?” he asked.

Phoebe smiled. Shook her head discreetly. “Do you want a coffee?” she asked.

“Yeah.” He spoke like a badly behaved British rock star. “But I’m buying. What d’you want?”

Phoebe wanted a soy latte, but that suddenly felt like a wanky thing to say. She asked for a flat white.

As she waited for Sam to return, Phoebe tried the superannuation story again. The words blurred. Why did Sam want to see her? Phoebe glanced over at the café. He was two from the back of a queue that snaked around the café’s magazine stand, in front of a glass cabinet that displayed the cakes and finally out in front of the cash register.



Dom's was not actually a discrete café, just a hole-in-the-wall convenience store that sold things like razors and toothbrushes and two-minute noodles and coffee and which boasted a half a dozen tables in the middle of the parquet-lined parliamentary corridor. It was not the only place in Parliament to get coffee—the cafeteria did discounted caffeine—but if you wanted to be seen (or see), Dom's it was. Did Phoebe want to be seen with Sam? She didn't know. *He'd* been the one who'd suggested Dom's, although he'd called it “that café in parliament”. He probably didn't know it was a parade ground.

Glancing again at the coffee line, Phoebe saw Larissa and Tom join the queue. They were about five places behind Sam, but they were doing their flirting-arguing thing and Sam was looking at the cakes, so they hadn't noticed one another. Phoebe pleaded silently with Larissa to please not see Sam. But either Phoebe was no good at telepathy or Larissa was a heartless bitch because the next moment, Phoebe heard a little scream and looked up to see Larissa step around the magazine stand and give Sam a shoulder squeeze. He looked pleased to see her. They kissed one another on the cheek and then Sam held Larissa at arm's length and looked her up and down with obvious, even theatrical, relish. Phoebe couldn't believe she was engaged. And that he *knew* she was engaged. There was a movement at the corner of Phoebe's vision and she realised Tom was watching her watching Sam and Larissa. Tom rolled his eyes and Phoebe returned the gesture. She tried not to blush. Then, hoping Tom hadn't seen anything in her face that she didn't want him too, she looked back down at her newspaper. She wouldn't risk looking up again until Sam was back at the table.

“One flat white.” Phoebe jumped as Sam slid the coffee under her arm from behind. He'd snuck up on her. He circled the table and plonked in the chair opposite. He was holding a big silver milkshake cup.

“So, who’s the gun reporter, then?” he said, teasing.

Phoebe felt herself flush and fought her rising temperature. She was *not* going to be shy. People like Sam didn’t go for shrinking violets. Not that she was interested in him like that, but *professionally* she was not going to get anything out of him if he felt he had all the power.

“Well, I think you know the answer to that,” Phoebe said, sipping her coffee with feigned nonchalance. “Otherwise, wouldn’t you be buying coffee for Larissa?”

“Ooooh,” Sam grinned and mimicked a cat baring its claws.

Phoebe fought the urge to correct him; to tell him she wasn’t actually a bitch. She shrugged. “So, what did you want to talk to me about?”

Phoebe noted, not without satisfaction, that Sam looked slightly taken aback at the business-like turn the conversation had just taken.

“Well,” he said, taking the milkshake straw out of the corner of his mouth and unzipping a shoulder bag. “I thought you might like this...” He fossicked in the bag, pulled out an A4 brown envelope and slid it across the table to Phoebe.

Phoebe put her hand on the envelope and raised her eyebrows in a question.

“It’s a report by Doctors for Refugees,” Sam said. “It’s being released tomorrow.”

“And you’re leaking it to me now,” Phoebe finished for him.

“Yep,” Sam said. He looked at her. He was waiting for her to say thank you.

“Why?” Phoebe asked.

Sam looked at her.

“I mean, you’re obviously not just doing it out of affection for me,” she said.

“No,” Sam said stiffly, “obviously. We’re giving it to you cos we thought you might make a bigger deal of it if you were the first one to get it.”

“Noone else has it?” Phoebe said.

“Nope,” Sam said.

“What’s it say?” Phoebe asked, slitting the envelope open with her fingernail.

“Why don’t you read it?” Sam said. “And if you don’t want it, I’ll give it to someone else.”

Phoebe noticed his eye-teeth were slightly crooked giving him the appearance of an imp—or a vampire. She wished she hadn’t pissed him off. She liked the flirting. She told herself to concentrate. To pretend she was Tara or Larissa, some girl who wouldn’t let Sam faze her.

“Fine,” she said, with a toughness that was entirely false. She took a sip of her coffee, thought: I should be the first to leave. She waved the envelope. “Thanks for this. I’ll take a look and let you know.”

“You know, a simple thank you would be nice,” Sam said. “I *have* just leaked you a report that took us a year to put together.”

“I *said* thank you.” She forced herself to laugh. “Or would you like me to thank you again?” She clasped his hand theatrically. “Thank you, Doctor,” she said breathlessly.

Sam drew his hand away. “Yeah well, I hope you can get a good story out of it, seeing as how I convinced everyone that you’d be the best person to leak it to.” He got up and shook her hand.

Phoebe’s heart sank. She’d overdone the hard-to-get act. But then she reminded herself it wasn’t an act. What did he expect her to do? Fall all over herself thanking him for leaking to her, when he’d only done it out of self-interest anyway? And only because *she* was the best immigration reporter. How was *that* a favour? She wondered whether his

air of entitlement came from his English upbringing or if it was an NGO thing, a consequence of feeling himself to be morally superior. As if that gave him the right to be arrogant and flirtatious and—

“So, I have to go now,” Sam said, and Phoebe realised she was still holding his hand.

Damien wasn’t interested in Sam’s report, in which twenty of the country’s leading psychiatrists argued that children in detention centres were at an *unacceptably high risk of mortality or serious injury*.

“M’yeah,” he said, through bites of something that couldn’t wait ‘til he was off the phone to be eaten. “But doctors are always saying that kind of thing, aren’t they? 20 cems, tops. Anything else on the boil?”

Phoebe tried to make the story sound more attractive. She told him they had the report exclusively. She mentioned that one of the doctors who was criticising the PM had received an AO from him the previous year. She told him lives were at stake. Nothing worked.

“We really need something *happening*,” Damien said. “Like, someone actually dying? Or, like, if the Minister was actually going to do something about the report—let the kids go or something?”

Phoebe tried not to sound desperate as she said goodbye and hung up. She had to get Sam’s report on Page One. Had to. She pictured Sam’s crinkly eyes, his vampire teeth. She was not an idiot. She knew Sam was a pants-man, but still, she was pretty sure he felt *something* for her, even if it was only a tiny little something. But Phoebe had a

feeling that her attractiveness to Sam was in direct proportion to her success. And if she didn't get his report off the front page, he would know straightaway that she was all bluff, that she wasn't the confident, successful woman he'd leaked to. If she were really the gun reporter she'd made herself out to be, if she really had the power she pretended to wield, she'd get Sam's report on the front page. He may not know much about media, but surely he knew that no journalist would ever willingly nominate their story for anywhere other than the front.

At 6.10 that night, Phoebe waited until Delahunty's reception area was clear and the young blonde receptionist had stepped away from her desk and then darted quickly to the door of his private office. She tapped lightly and walked in before anyone could tell her not to. Delahunty was asleep, sprawled out on the green Chesterman couch, his feet up on the oak coffee table, a report lying across his chest, a watery whisky balanced precariously on the couch next to him. Phoebe wondered if he was drunk. His navy, pin-striped trousers had ridden up his leg to reveal black leather ankle boots with zips up the inside. A pristine leather jacket was hanging from a coat stand behind his desk.

Phoebe coughed.

Calvin sat up suddenly. "The bells?" he said. "Is it the bells? What time is it?"

"It's 6.15," Phoebe said.

"Did we have an appointment?" Delahunty said. He stood up and started for the door.

"No," Phoebe put out an arm to stop him. "I'm sorry," she said and assumed a cheeky face, "I just wanted to catch you really, really, quickly and ... there was no one at reception." She shrugged her shoulders.

Delahunty didn't look convinced.

"I will be, like, five minutes *tops*," Phoebe said, clasping her hands together, "pleeeease?"

"OK," Delahunty said, sitting back down. "You've got five minutes."

"So," Phoebe sat down close enough for their knees to touch. She was desperate.

"There's this report that's being released tomorrow that I've been given the drop on."

Delahunty raised his eyebrows.

"There are some big, big names behind it," Phoebe went on, "doctors, psychiatrists, and they're saying that children in detention are at significant risk of suicide and injury." She looked at him.

"Can I have a look at this report?" Delahunty said.

"Of course," Phoebe said. "But please keep it under your hat. I've got it to myself."

Delahunty shook his head. "You journalists," he tsked. "Always so competitive!" He flicked quickly through the report as Phoebe watched his face for reaction. It was a short report. More of a letter really. The doctors had only visited one minimum-security detention centre, the others being closed to outside visitors, so they had largely drawn their conclusions from overseas experience.

"I think I'll sit this one out," Delahunty said, after a minute. He handed the report back to Phoebe.

"You're declining to comment?" Phoebe asked.

"I'd rather not decline to do anything," Delahunty said stiffly. "I'd rather you just not mention coming to see me at all."

"Well, I can't do that," Phoebe said. "Bottie told me to get a comment from you."

“Say you couldn’t contact me,” Delahunty said, examining his fingernails. “But do not,” he looked up at her, “threaten me”.

Phoebe felt ill. “I’m not trying to threaten you—I’m sorry if that’s what it sounded like. It’s just, I thought, after the story the other day, about you considering releasing Halani and Mo, you’d want to make a comment on this report or even...”

“Even what, Phoebe?” Delahunty snapped. He tapped his watch. “And your five minutes is rapidly drawing to a close.”

“Even let them go?”

“Let who go?” Delahunty said, pushing himself off the Chesterman.

“Halani and Mo,” Phoebe said, pushing herself up too.

Delahunty brayed with laughter. “Oh! Just like that!” He clicked his fingers. “That easy!”

“Well, it *is* that easy, isn’t it?” Phoebe asked. “You can use Section 417? And you’re already *thinking* about letting them go, so actually letting them go is just the logical next step. And this way, you’re the good guy because you’re making sure nothing bad happens to them—”

“Oh Phoebe, Phoebe, Phoebe,” Delahunty chuckled, giving her a shoulders a squeeze. “Your innocence is touching. Of course, I would *love* to let these children go, but it is not just as easy as saying, I have Section 417 therefore I let them go.”

“Yes it is, the law says—”

“I’m aware of what the law says,” Calvin snapped. “I’m *talking* about politics. The fact is, most voters don’t really care about your poor little refugees” he waved a hand, “or asylum seekers. Anyway, when they hurt themselves the punters see it as emotional blackmail or something of the sort.” Calvin waved his hands. “Of course it’s completely

heartless, but the voters just get awfully cross when people sew their lips together, jump off buildings yada, yada, yada. And if the Government caved in to that sort of pressure, well, you can *imagine* how they'd feel about us." He put his hands on his hips.

"Would you believe the polls show that our popularity actually *increases* when we ignore the sewn-up lips?" He sighed theatrically. "So, ignore it we must. Though of course, I pray about poor Halani and Mo *constantly* and rest assured I will be doing everything I can behind the scenes to get them out ..." he trailed off and wandered over to his computer.

"I'm sorry, Phoebe. I'm going to have to end our little tête-à-tête. I've got a *load* to do."

Phoebe felt everything slipping away. "So is it the Prime Minister?" she asked recklessly. "Is he the reason you can't let them go? Does he have to approve all the releases or something?"

Calvin looked pissed off for a moment, before straightening. He brayed loudly. "Oh, Phoebe! What a conspiratorial bent you have. Of *course* not! Why even *have* an Immigration Minister if I am not allowed to make my own decisions?"

It's definitely the Prime Minister, Phoebe thought, fuming.

As Phoebe walked the stairs back up to the Bureau she debated whether she should just call Sam and tell him the report wasn't going to make the front page. No, she told herself. She couldn't. It would look too pathetic. Any power she had over him would be gone. But, she argued back, at least he wouldn't be pissed off about burning his story on her; as soon as the *Trib* judged the report worth a mere 20 cems the other papers wouldn't touch it. Phoebe stopped on the landing of the first floor to catch her breath. She held the rail and pulled away from it, trying to stretch the knots out of her back. She



wondered whether Delahunty was right about the voters. She couldn't believe that people didn't care about kids committing suicide or sewing their lips together. Maybe in the abstract, they could not care, but surely not if they actually saw Mohammad's big eyes, his chubby cheeks? Phoebe stood up and stretched up on her tiptoes. She wished she'd asked to actually see the polling. The pollsters had probably only spoken to the white trash. Those polls couldn't come from normal people, city people. Delahunty had just been sold a pup. Or at least found it convenient to pretend he had.

Phoebe sighed and sat down on the bottom stair. The cold of the linoleum-lined concrete seeped through her trousers and she stared at a large fibreglass canvas hanging on the wall opposite, its vomit-like splatter shiny in the fluorescent lights of the stairwell. It was a clever move hiding the fiberglass in the stairwell, Phoebe thought. Hardly anyone bothered with the stairs. She kicked the wall. How *hard* was it to let two kids go? Especially if you knew, as she was sure Calvin did, that it was the right thing to do? Phoebe wondered whether it had ever even occurred to him that the people who wanted refugees in gaol were not the kind of people that would ever turn out to cheer for Calvin Delahunty; that would ever ask for his autograph? He was too ... too metrosexual. They only ever turned out for the PM and even then they weren't such an attractive proposition anyway with their wobbly voices and their rude, cardboard signs made out of beer cartons and their indignant eyes. The rednecks didn't belong to university Amnesty clubs, they didn't have names like Amber and Ella and Susannah and they never, *ever* followed Calvin from appearance to appearance like groupies. Didn't Delahunty realise that releasing Halani and Mohammad would make him a hero to the Ambers and Ellas and Susannahs? Not to mention the Double Bay ladies in his electorate and a large chunk of the media. Phoebe thought of Delahunty's aviators and his barely worn leather jacket.

She grabbed hold of the cool metal of the banister and pulled herself up the stairs, an idea coming to the surface of her mind. She wondered ... would Delahunty be able to give up the Ellas and Susannahs and Ambers once they were lining up to serve as his interns? Could he give up the invites to Amnesty dinners? The cheering crowds? Phoebe would bet her own job that he couldn't.

"Bet he couldn't what?" a voice floated down the stairs on the clatter of high heels.

"Sorry," Phoebe realised she'd been speaking out loud.

A blur of pink came into view. Larissa was rushing to the gym, bag over her shoulder. "Hope you haven't got any more bombshells for us!" she called as she clattered by.

As soon as she got back to her desk, Phoebe sent a message to Damien.

*Delahunty not biting on the report. But a good source tells me he's going to let the Afghan kids go. Pls keep under your hat—we have it to ourselves. Definitely a front page.*

Ten seconds later, the phone rang.

"Delahunty's letting the kids go?" Damien demanded.

"Uh-huh," Phoebe said, hoping he'd hear her typing and leave her to it.

"When?"

"Dunno," she said, speaking carefully, so that Matilda couldn't overhear and try to kybosh the story.

"But he's definitely going to do it?" Damien said. "I mean this source is credible? They heard it from Delahunty himself?"

Phoebe bit her lip. She fought an urge to hyperventilate. She was almost *positive* Delahunty couldn't give up his good guy reputation. She was almost positive he couldn't say no, that it was all a mistake and he had *not* decided to save two desperate children; she was almost positive he wouldn't relinquish the hero status. But she could be wrong.

"Phoebe??!"

"Huh?" Phoebe said. She stared at the Uighur boy on her computer screen; he had the same big eyes as Mohammad, the same cheeks, still chubby from childhood. Mohammad could die if he was left in that place. That was what Sam's report said. And no one was doing anything about it. The computer monitor went to sleep, enveloping the Uighur boy in blackness. Phoebe asked herself what was the worst that could happen. Delahunty could say she made the story up. That he'd never decided to let the children go. So what, Phoebe thought. She could just admit it; say she was desperate to help the children. Wouldn't people, wouldn't *Sam*, admire her for that? It was no crime to have a compassionate heart.

"Phoebe! I've got to go to fucking conference," Damien snapped. "I *said* is he definitely going to do it? Your source is good for the story?"

"Yep," Phoebe said, hitting a key on her keyboard and resurrecting the Uighur boy. "Watertight."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Calvin was terrified at the thought of the PM's disapproval. Oh well old chap, he told himself, there's nothing to be done about it now. He giggled nervously. Despite his terror, Calvin did feel slightly in awe of his own earlier bravery. As Immigration Minister he was, of course, perfectly *entitled* to grant refugees or asylum seekers or whatever they were called the right to stay in Australia. But he'd never dreamed of using his power without first consulting the PM and of course he'd never consulted the PM because he knew what the PM's answer would be. Dutch courage may have had something to do with it. Calvin giggled again. He couldn't actually remember deciding to let the Afghan kids go, let alone telling anyone about his decision. He hadn't been playing silly buggers when Phoebe asked him to comment on the doctors' report; he genuinely *hadn't* decided to let the kids go. At least he *thought* he hadn't. And playing over the scene of her visit in his head, Calvin felt quite sure *Phoebe* hadn't yet known of his plans. Phoebe's source must have contacted her just after she'd been to see him. Calvin was a bit surprised she hadn't called him back for a comment. Perhaps she'd been too close to deadline, he thought. Or, more likely, the skeptic in him said, she didn't want him to rob her of the story by denying it.

Calvin tried to piece together a little theory of what had happened. It must have been the night he'd returned from Central. He'd left the journos and met up with the chaps for a curry. After dinner they'd moved on to a bar, which was packed with backbenchers and flaks and hacks and the occasional minister. He had been rather naughty, alcohol-wise. And he'd probably spoken to dozens of people that night. He'd been *thinking* about letting the children go; he must have just mixed up his words a bit somewhere in there, given the impression he'd already made a concrete decision.

Thankfully, Phoebe's source seemed simpatico. In fact, Calvin actually came up rather well in her story. He'd spoken very eloquently about refugees, even if Phoebe's source had had to paraphrase him. It was almost a pity that the source hadn't just interviewed him directly; then Phoebe could have quoted him verbatim, which was always more powerful. Plus Calvin had also provided a very strong defence of his decision—despite being drunk—making it almost impossible for the PM to step in without looking like a twat. The proof of *that* was in the fact that it was now past 11am and Suitor still hadn't rung. Calvin giggled. He was safe. And he couldn't help feeling a little bit proud of himself. If alcohol brought out a man's true colours, then Calvin's colours were rather lovely.

When Calvin arrived at the press conference later that afternoon, Larissa was in her usual spot: front and centre of the media pack

"Who knew *you* were such a bleeding heart?" she said as Calvin brushed past.

Calvin gave his humble shrug, then pointed to a cardboard square on the ground in front of the cameras: "this where you want me?" he asked. He smiled and waved at a couple of the journos as the cameramen jostled. Quite a big turnout, he thought.

"Everyone ready?" he asked after a suitable time. The pack fell silent. "Right. Well, some of you called Tara this morning asking for comments on the *Trib's* story," he nodded in Phoebe's direction, "so we thought it might be easier to hold a presser, let you ask your questions all in one go."

Actually, Tara had tried to talk Calvin out of the press conference: she said she was worried he'd be verbally "again" insinuating people were always shoving words into his mouth. Calvin was beginning to find her possessiveness rather irritating.

“What’s so special about these children?” Noora’s voice came at him from somewhere near the back.

“Well, Noora,” Calvin answered into the cameras, “these children have been through a horrific ordeal and there are concerns about their mental—”

“I *mean*, Minister,” Noora interrupted, “there are a lot of children in detention. Does your interest in this particular case have anything to do with it being so high profile?”

Calvin guffawed. “Of course not!” he said. “I review hundreds of cases in the course of my ministerial duties. It was just that I happened to be asked about this particular one.”

“So which other cases are you reviewing?” Noora didn’t even give him time to answer the question. “Or could you tell us how many other people you’ve granted refugee status?”

Aha, thought Calvin. Poor Noora is miffed about being scooped again and she thinks *Calvin* gave Phoebe the story.

Calvin tsked good-naturedly. “Now Noora, you know I can’t disclose that.” He pointed into the middle of the media pack. “Tom?”

“Won’t this send the wrong message to illegal queue jumpers?” Tom asked. “I mean, won’t they think Australia’s a soft touch?”

“No, no, no ... not at all, Tom. Australia has a very strong border protection policy and Section 417 of the Migration Act,” Calvin paused. They probably didn’t even know what 417 *was*, but Calvin would be kind, explain it to them. “That’s the ministerial power under which I’m releasing these children,” he said. “And my decision just shows how *well* it is working. If an asylum seeker is genuine, they will be allowed to stay. If not

..." he shrugged.

Calvin had another thought. "You might be interested to know that Section 417 of the Act has existed for quite some time—since 1989, is that right, Tara?—It's just that," Calvin paused meaningfully, "the media has not shown an interest before now." Calvin looked into the throng again. Phoebe was almost the only journo who didn't have her hand up. Perhaps she felt she'd exhausted the topic. Just behind her, Calvin recognized the floppy fringe of the poncing Dr Sam. Verrrry interesting, he thought. Perhaps there was something going on there? Certainly, Dr Sam was awfully lucky that Phoebe had tacked his boring little report onto Calvin's big decision. It would *never* have made the front page otherwise.

Calvin singled out Larissa for a question.

"Hi, Minister." She tossed her russet hair. "Our viewers were very moved by your emotional response to these kids. Can you tell us what touched you so deeply?"

It was the question Calvin had been waiting for. He dropped his head, wiped quickly but noticeably at his eyes and then looked up into the cameras. "Oh well ... ahhh", he smiled his sheepish smile, "You've caught me a bit by surprise, Larissa ... To be honest," he spread his palms as he'd practiced. "I didn't expect my comments to be reported ... I didn't think anyone was interested in how *I* felt ... And really, my feelings aren't the issue. This is about Halani and Mohammad – those are the children's names ... yes, it's spelt H.A.L.... actually you'd best get the spelling from Tara ... This is about Halani and Mohammad and the terrible suffering they have bee... have been thr... I... I'm sorry ..." Calvin bowed his head again. For a moment he thought he was actually going to cry. Those kids really *had* moved him he thought with surprise; he really *was* compassionate. He felt moved again, this time by his own compassion: here he was, a

busy federal minister, just doing the little he could to help two poor orphans.

“When do you expect the children to be let out?” someone yelled and Calvin took one more swipe at his eyes before looking up again. Tara was pushing her way through the throng, but slowly, as they’d planned, giving the cameras enough time to capture Calvin’s tears. Tara announced the end of the press conference and there was a last desperate explosion of questions—“will you review the cases of other Afghan children?” “Do these two remind you of your own kids?”—then Calvin was making his apologies and following Tara through the pack and back to Parliament House.

He hadn’t noticed Suitor before. The PM’s Chief of Staff was leaning against the wall of the Ministerial Entrance sharing a cigarette with the finance minister, Cameron Robb. Calvin nodded curtly in their direction as he headed back into the House. He hoped he looked braver than he felt.

Two weeks later, Calvin was having dinner with Alistair and Marshall at Hawke Vietnamese when Phoebe called. It was after 9pm and Calvin wondered how the hell she’d got his mobile number. He motioned to Alistair and Marshall that he’d take the call outside.

“Sorry to interrupt your evening, Minister,” Phoebe said. She obviously wasn’t sorry, Calvin thought, or she wouldn’t be interrupting it.

Phoebe continued: “I just wanted to let you know that we’re running a story in tomorrow’s paper about George Bok.”

“I beg your pardon?” Calvin shut the sliding door a little too loudly; he saw Alistair and Marshall look up, startled.

“George Bok,” Phoebe repeated, as if the name meant anything to Calvin. “The



Congolese boy who—,”

“Phoebe,” Calvin snapped, irritated at being outside in the freezing cold without a jacket or a glass of red. “I have absolutely no *idea* what you are talking about.”

“So you deny the story?” Phoebe asked.

“What are you talking about?” Calvin suddenly realized he needed to pay attention.

“Are you denying that you’re planning to release George Bok from detention?” Phoebe said. “Or are you just declining to comment?”

“I wasn’t aware we were on the record,” Calvin said. “In fact, I was under the impression this was just a courtesy call to let me know about a story.”

Phoebe didn’t reply.

“I don’t suppose you could read me this story?” Calvin said, “so I have *some* idea of what I’m meant to be commenting on ... or declining to comment on?”

Phoebe agreed to read the story. It was a horrible story. The boy, George, had watched his own father butchered with a machete, three of his friends killed and his mother raped, and had spent the last two years in a refugee camp trying to avoid fights between the different warring groups. He’d been in Central for more than six months, because he’d accidentally been “screened out” when first picked up from the boat; he hadn’t used the right sequence of words to get his asylum claim considered. He’d been screened back in after another detainee smuggled a letter to the Refugee Legal Service, but then his application had been rejected by the Department and the Refugee Review Tribunal because, for some reason, The Congo had been taken off the list of ‘risky’ countries. Still, the Tribunal had suggested Calvin could use Section 417 to let the boy stay on humanitarian grounds. According to Phoebe’s source, Calvin’s heart had gone

out to George and he was determined to let him stay in Australia.

But, thought Calvin, he'd never heard of George Bok. He knew practically nothing about the Congo. He had not made this decision.

Still, Calvin was impressed by how statesmanlike he sounded in Phoebe's story. Brave. Compassionate. A rather attractive man. Then he remembered Phoebe's story reporting on his decision to release Halani and Mo. He'd sounded much the same in that story. Had he made *that* decision? Or had someone else? Was this mysterious source of Phoebe's just, well, making all Calvin's decisions for him?

"But, it seems," Phoebe said, "like you're saying my source is wrong ... That you're *not* releasing George?"

"No, no, now hang on a minute," Calvin said. "I'm not denying anything ... I just ... your story took me by surprise ... The details of this case were highly confidential and ..."

Calvin tried to think through his options as he spoke. Should he deny the story—which was already in the *Trib's* first edition and would be picked up by the rest of the media from there? Should he admit he'd never even heard of the boy? That someone was playing silly buggers? Such denials would look horribly unfeeling, cold-hearted even. Releasing the Afghan kids had been a good move for him, and this George story made him look even more compassionate. He may not have made the actual decision, but he would probably have decided to release George himself *anyway*, once he got around to reading the case notes. So why, Calvin asked himself, make yourself out to be the bad guy now?

"Maybe," said Phoebe, breaking softly into his thoughts, "you could just decline to comment? It would buy you some time. Plus it would get around any criticism that you

leaked the story yourself, you know, for PR?”

Yes, thought Calvin, that *could* work.

He tried to sound annoyed. “I suppose that if someone has leaked this to you, then all I *can* do is decline to comment.”

“No problem,” Phoebe shot back cheerfully. “Good decision by the way. I mean *if* you decided, cause you haven’t confirmed anything of course, but ... well ...for what it’s worth, I thought you were just another politician. This shows you’re a real huma ...” she petered out. “Anyway, I’ve got to get the story updated for the later editions. Thanks, Calvin.”

Alistair tapped on the window. The food had arrived.

“You start,” Calvin mouthed through the glass, pointing at his phone. “Got to make a call.” What to do, he wondered. It would look suspicious if he started asking for information about George *after* Phoebe’s article appeared. He should have some witnesses to the fact that he was at least *thinking* of letting the boy go. He scrolled through the numbers in his phone until he found Judy’s.

The Dep. Sec for Immigration answered after a single ring. Get a *life*, Judy! Calvin thought.

“Judy. Calvin Delahunty ... Yes, yes ... I need you to do something for me. Can you get me a briefing on a young man called George Bok, *God, how did you spell the name? He should know that.* Sorry, bit of a mental block on the spelling, but it shouldn’t be hard to find him. About 16, Congolese, George Bok, the Ministerial Intervention Unit might have sent me a Section 417 advice on him ... no, no, everything is fine. Well, not for this poor boy of course, concerns raised about his mental state yada yada, but the Government hasn’t done anything wrong ... No, no the Department hasn’t either, but

listen, Judy, I need this tonight ...Yep. As soon as you can. This case is—the boy is—well, we need to get him out quickly.”

Judy didn’t even say goodbye. Calvin pictured her dragging dozens of public servants away from dinners, drinks, films and beds to locate the file, get an approval for its release, rewrite it into language fit for a minister and any other parties to whom he may leak it, edit it, sign it off at five different managerial levels and answer any questions the media might ask in case they ever got their hands on the file. Oh, and then there was the chap whose highly-paid, leave-padded job it was to send faxes. The wheels of bureaucracy being what they were, Judy’s fax wouldn’t arrive for hours. Calvin slid back the door. The chaps had just ordered a second bottle of red.

“Emergency?” Alistair asked, as Calvin sat back down.

“Just another bloody leak.” Calvin signaled the waiter to bring him a fresh glass.

“Shit,” said Alistair. As if, Calvin thought, *Alistair* knew what it was like to have important information leaked. “Bad?”

“Survivable,” said Calvin, enjoying how cavalier he sounded.

“Any suspicions?” Marshall asked.

Calvin let his eyebrows bounce, took a sip of his wine.

“Really?” Alistair asked, his eyes searching Calvin’s face for clues. “Who? Judy? ... Someone in the party? ... Tara? ...No. TARA??”

Marshall looked from Alistair to Calvin, his eyes wide. “You think Tara’s the leak? ... Seriously?” he said. “She never struck me as that cluey ... *Or* that motivated. I always thought she was just another groupie.”

Alistair rubbed his chin thoughtfully and raised his eyebrows at Calvin. “Even groupies can get motivated if they’re pissed off enough about something.”

“Oh shut up!” Calvin brayed, dismissing the innuendo with a flick of his wrist.

“You wish!”

“Actually, *I* wish,” Marshall said wistfully. He bit a prawn off a sugar cane stick and wiped the juice from his chin. “Where do you find such hot staffers?”

“Oh come, come!” Calvin wagged his finger at Marshall. “That Shirley of yours is an absolute gem.”

“Yeah, right,” sighed Marshall. “A real diamond in the rough.”

Judy’s fax arrived just after 2am. Calvin had fallen asleep fully clothed on top of the bed covers. His mouth felt like a desert, but thankfully his red wine headache hadn’t kicked in yet. He sat up gingerly, then limped out to the living room and picked a page off the fax machine. Judy had written a bloody *essay* on the cover page. Calvin ignored her scribbles, looked at the number of pages to expect (42) and cursed the verbosity of public servants before padding off to have a shower, some Panadeine Forte and a strong coffee as he awaited the rest of the fax.

Later, sitting cross-legged on the couch, briefing in one hand and pink highlighter in the other, Calvin was struck by the romance of the picture: the dedicated politician, toiling long hours into the lonely night in pursuit of justice. Unfortunately his skin stuck to the leather couch, so after a few minutes he went back to bed.

Judy’s briefing gave him little more than what he’d already learned from Phoebe’s story. Calvin pulled out his laptop and googled the Democratic Republic of Congo. It was all very confusing. There seemed to be about seven wars going on. Or seven different sides—all of them bad. People had been burnt in their houses, raped; children kidnapped and turned into soldiers and made to kill one another’s families. Calvin pictured his own

son Casper stuck in some camp, surrounded by escapees from *The Lord of the Flies*. He shook off the thought, shut down his computer. At least he was doing something about it, he told himself, even if it was just one child. Maybe when young George got out, Calvin could visit him ... or bring him home to Amelia for a proper dinner and some normal family life ... he could play with Constance and Casper ...

Over the next two months, Calvin used Section 417 to grant dozens more visas. He used another of his powers, one which allowed him to declare anywhere a place of detention, even a hotel or a volunteer's home, to get children out of those horrible detention centres. Calvin hadn't even *known* he could declare places of detention until Phoebe's source said he was using the power to get some Sri Lankan kids into a foster home. None of his advisors had ever told him he could declare a place of detention. He wondered whether Suitor had counseled them against it. There was an election coming up and the PM didn't want to look soft on "illegals".

Calvin did wonder every now and again about the identity of Phoebe's source, wondered who was making his decisions. He asked her, but, not surprisingly, she said she never revealed sources. He also ordered an audit of the Department, mostly for show, which turned up nothing untoward. Still, Calvin wasn't overly worried. This source, whoever it was, seemed to be in touch with Calvin's true character. The decisions were all ones he would have made by himself, once he'd got round to them. As airy-fairy as it sounded, Calvin couldn't help but feel there was something Providential about the whole situation, as if he had been chosen for this by some higher force a bit like the way God had picked out Moses or Charlie had picked out the angels. Finding out that Phoebe's source was some pimply grad working in Immigration or Ruth Lopes of the hairy upper

lip would just spoil the magic. Plus, it felt good letting children like George go. It felt good being ‘above politics’ even if it Suitor and the PM weren’t talking to him. Calvin was a sought-after speaker on the lecture circuit. *The Monthly* and *Marie Claire* had run profiles about him. He was a special guest at charity dinners, a VIP at music award nights. Everything was perfect.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

It was the night of the One World Ball and the oak-panelled walls of Parliament's entrance hall had been hung with fairy lights for the occasion, a one-off event hosted by a coalition of refugee charities with high-profile patrons. The formal proceedings were still half an hour away and the polities and journalists were making their entrances on the stretch of rubber-backed red carpet that someone had dragged in front of the double doors of the Great Hall. Phoebe had bought a new dress—red, long, strapless—and a new red lipstick for the occasion and had had her hair blow-dried. Crossing the atrium, she passed Larissa interviewing a reality TV star that had once said something good about refugees; the gelled spikes of his hair were shiny in the camera lights.

Phoebe scanned the noticeboards at the entrance to the Great Hall. She didn't even bother with tables one to 10; they would be reserved for the PM, the B-grade TV stars that had been roped into coming and the political editors. Even though, Phoebe thought, *she* had done more to further the cause of refugees than any of them. She sighed. She didn't actually want to be on any of those tables anyway. Ah, there she was: Phoebe Esther Valor, Table 24. With Noora and Tom and an annoying Greens Senator called Elouise de Creupin who was always bursting into tears, and ... Sam.

Phoebe had expected Sam to be invited. Still, it gave her a little jolt, seeing his name there on the noticeboard, just a couple away from her own. She walked into the Hall; usually austere, it had been hung with disco balls and gold balloons and cellophane sculptures that looked like space shuttles, but no doubt had some other, deeper, meaning. Phoebe found Table 24 near the middle of the Hall, respectable in terms of placing, not



A-team but not too far down the hierarchy either. She held her breath as she looked for the little white card with her name on it.

“You’re Phoebe Valor, aren’t you?” a high-pitched, wavery voice interrupted her search. It was Elouise de Creupin, the Green. “You’re right here next to me!”

Phoebe forced a smile. On her other side was a researcher called Owen who worked for something called the Fair Go Institute and who was also at his place unfashionably early. Phoebe reluctantly took her seat: it would be rude not to. Still she hoped Sam wouldn’t see her sitting there before everyone else, looking like she didn’t have any contacts or friends to talk to. There were another nine possible places where Sam could be sitting. Not that Phoebe could look at any of the place tags without seeming overly concerned with networking. She introduced herself to Owen and kissed cheeks with the Green, who was insect-like in her big glasses and shimmery emerald dress.

“Phoebe has been writing some *amazing* stories about asylum seekers,” the Green told Owen. “Incredible contacts ... and she’s just been *so* good at keeping the issue in the public eye.” Elouise put her hand on Phoebe’s arm. Her eyes filled with tears. Oh *no*, thought Phoebe.

“We. Just. Have. To. Stop. This. ... this *horror!*” Senator de Creupin managed to pant, before she had to hide her face behind her hands.

“Yes,” said Phoebe, unsatisfactorily. She was trying to think of something else to add, something comforting, when a honking laugh distracted her and she turned to see Calvin Delahunty prancing into the Hall with a little entourage in his wake. Delahunty peeled off to air kiss a woman in a fuchsia puff of a dress. Behind him Tara was walking arm in arm with Sam. Tara whispered something in Sam’s ear and he threw back his head and laughed. Phoebe’s stomach turned. She excused herself and darted to the

bathroom. It was the first time she'd seen Sam since the press conference about Halani and Mo's release. When he'd kissed her goodbye. On the cheek. Quite close to her mouth.

When Phoebe returned to the table, Sam was deep in conversation with Noora on the other side of a massive centrepiece of cellophane and gold balloons. He caught Phoebe's eye as she sat and raised his eyebrows in greeting. His hair, washed, was still long and still hung into his eyes; it stood out among all the Young Republican buzz-cuts.

Owen and Elouise were getting on famously and after a few attempts to involve Phoebe in their conversation about coal-seam mining, they gave up and talked around her. Why did Greens always have to have such intense conversations, Phoebe wondered. She ran her finger along the menu in front of her. Did they ever talk about handbags? Or reality TV? Phoebe pretended to adjust her shoe so she could see what was happening behind the centrepiece. Sam was still talking to Noora. It had seemed, at the press conference, that maybe Sam was interested in her. Phoebe knew he was a womaniser. But still, she was pretty sure *she* was one of the women he was keen on. They'd emailed. They'd email-flirted. And there had been that kiss after the press conference that might have been simply a peck on the cheek or might not have. But in the last week or so the emails had stopped. Phoebe would have written but she'd run out of double entendres. And every time she thought of something she could ask—like whether Sam had a contact in such-and-such a detention centre or whether he knew a psychologist who specialised in treating refugees—it had seemed too obvious. Now, as she watched Sam and Noora, it struck her that Sam had probably been email flirting with Noora and Larissa and Tara too. Then she remembered Sam cheek-kissing Larissa at Dom's cafe. Maybe he'd never

flirted with Phoebe after all. Maybe all the mutual attraction was just a figment of her imagination.

“So is he here?” Sam plonked down beside her.

The Green and the researcher had gone networking; and Phoebe had been trying to look busy by reading some notes she’d bought along in her handbag. She slid the notes under the menu. “Is who here?”

“Your mysterious source,” Sam said, wiggling his fingers spookily.

Phoebe smiled. “Maybe. Maybe not.”

“Very mysterious,” Sam smiled. “But I can keep a secret, you know.”

“Sorry,” Phoebe said, gaining confidence. “If I told you, I’d have to kill you,” she smiled. “Anyway, what makes you think it’s a he?”

Sam shrugged. “I dunno. I just get that he vibe.”

Phoebe’s stomach did a turn; he did *like* her. She flipped her hair. “You might be right.”

“You know there *is* a rumour ...” Sam trailed off.

“Oh?” said Phoebe. “And what is that?”

Sam raised his eyebrows. “That your source is none other than the Minister himself.”

Phoebe laughed. “Yeah, right.” When Sam didn’t say anything, she added: “why wouldn’t he just announce his decisions himself? Why leak them to me?”

“Well, I don’t know much about PR and spin and all of that,” Sam said, “but Noora reckons that *leaking* the decisions saves him from looking like a publicity slut. You

know, like those stars who go and get photographed with starving African kids. Also, it helps him get around the Prime Minister—“

“So you and Noora couldn’t find anything to talk about except me?” Phoebe said with fake bravado.

Sam laughed. “Not really ... we spent most of our time trying to work out how you keep getting such great scoops ...”

“And you decided that it *couldn’t* possibly be that I’m a good journalist, it had to be that the Minister was using me as his mouthpiece.” Phoebe struggled to keep her voice light. Her cheeks were burning.

Sam shrugged.

“And did you and Noora decide why he chose *me* as his messenger?”

Sam grinned. Raised his eyebrows. “No-o-o,” he said, in a way that made it obvious they had.

Phoebe stared at him. “*Oh.*” She tried to keep the wobble out of her voice. “So you think I’m,” she swallowed, “with the Minister—“

“Phoebe—“

“You think I’m sleeping with,” Phoebe couldn’t bring herself to say his name, “to get *scoops*.” She shook her head sarcastically. “God ... You must think I’m really ambitious.”

“No of course I don’t, you bloody twit!” Sam ruffled her hair.

Phoebe pulled away. Sam looked at her; his smile disappeared.

“I mean, yes, I think you’re really ambitious, but not *that* ambitious,” Sam said, more seriously.

Phoebe stared hard at the ceiling to try and stop the tears. She couldn't tell whether they were from Sam's joke or the wine or the fact that he was flirting with *the whole world*.

"Really, don't be so touchy, Phoebe. It was just a joke. Noora was just saying how well you were doing, how you'll be made a political correspondent soon and you won't be reporting on immigration anymore——"

"Oh, even better!" Phoebe forced a laugh. "I'm sleeping with the Minister to get front page stories and I'm using asylum seekers to boost my career ... And here I was thinking that you liked..."

"That I what?" Sam asked quickly, leaning in to her.

"Nothing," Phoebe said.

"No ... tell me what you were going to say, that you thought I ...what?" Sam said, grinning.

"Doesn't matter," Phoebe said. "I obviously misunderstood."

She wanted to tell him there was no source. To tell him that *she* was the one letting the children go. That she was the only one willing to risk everything to do what was right. That Delahunty was too much of a coward, that the advocates were too polite, that *Noora* was too concerned about her career and that the bureaucrats had their heads too far up their own arses. But Sam thought she was just another ambitious reporter. Just another notch for his advocacy database or for his bedpost and he probably didn't even care which. Actually, it wasn't even just that he wasn't interested in her, or that he had her clocked as just another ambitious reporter. He thought she was ambitious enough to—she shook the thought away like a cockroach that had landed on her shoulder.

It was Sam's fault she'd even started writing those stories about the refugees. She would never have written about Halani and Mo if it hadn't been for him putting the pressure on. She would certainly never have let them go if it hadn't been for his stupid report.

Clammy hands grabbed hold of Phoebe's bare shoulders and dragged her back to the dinner table. Delahunty pushed his shiny, pink face between her and Sam.

"Poor Miz misunderstood Phoebe," Delahunty said through his nose.

"Minister," she said and rubbed at an imaginary speck of dirt in her eye.

Delahunty straightened and began massaging Phoebe's shoulders. "Only the most instring people are misunderstood ... don't you agree, Dr Sam?"

"Yes," said Sam flatly.

"It just adds to their appeal," Delahunty breathed in loudly through his nose.

Phoebe rolled her eyes at Sam; trying to tell him she didn't know what Delahunty was on about. Sam looked—and Phoebe didn't blame him—faintly disgusted.

Delahunty bent down again. Phoebe held her breath trying not to inhale his sickly sweet stink.

"Anyway Miss Phoebe, *when* are we going to have that coffee?" he said. "You and I have a *lot* to talk about—"

Sam stood up. "Don't let me get in the way," he said. Phoebe panicked. Sam thought she was sleeping with Delahunty.

"Sam!" She said, grabbing his arm. "I know what you're thinking. It's not—" Phoebe faltered. What could she say? "It's not true."

“Right,” said Sam. He turned away from her. He nodded at Delahunty, ignoring the Minister’s extended hand. And then he left.

At 2.13pm the following day, Phoebe found herself sitting across from Delahunty at the Parliamentary café, eating a double serving of hot chips drenched in tomato sauce. She had ignored Delahunty’s calls to her mobile all morning, but by the time she got to work there were three ‘urgent’ messages waiting for her and Matilda was asking questions. To avoid any further suspicion among her colleagues, Phoebe rang him back. All Delahunty said was that he wanted to collect on her promise to meet him for a coffee. She could hear Matilda sucking on her braces and eavesdropping so Phoebe didn’t ask any more about why he wanted to meet. She’d have to wait until the café.

Now they’d been here for close to fifteen minutes and all Delahunty had told her was that Dom, the café owner, was the son of Greek immigrants who had come to Australia after the war. Almost everyone who worked in Parliament knew Dom’s story, but Delahunty had been too important to talk to Dom before now. Now, he thought that being friends with Dom showed what a ‘man of the people’ he was. Phoebe couldn’t be bothered telling him she already knew about Dom.

“So what’s so urgent?” Phoebe asked. The corners of her vision quivered as faces at surrounding tables turned to look at them. She wondered whether the rumour about her and Delahunty had gone further than Sam and Noora.

“Oh nothing really,” he giggled. “I just thought I’d have another go at getting you to disclose your source ... or at least telling me whatever your source has been saying about me. I notice they’ve been rather quiet in the past week or so.”

Phoebe stared at him. “I thought you said it was urgent,” she said, and then, remembering herself she added “Minister”. She sighed. “I have stuff I have to do.”

Delahunty’s smile disappeared. “Right, right. Of course. Sorry. I probably shouldn’t have said it was urgent. But I did need to talk to you ... To apologise really ... I felt last night, that I might have interrupted something between you and Dr Sam—” He raised his eyebrows in a question.

“I think he prefers Dr Carver,” Phoebe said. What was wrong with the man? First names and honorifics were for ballet and kindergarten teachers. He was behaving like a teenage girl.

“And no, Minister,” she said, shoving a hot chip into her mouth, “you didn’t interrupt anything.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” Delahunty said. “I *had* noticed,” he leaned over the table, stole one of Phoebe’s chips and pointed it at her, “a definite frisson between the two of you.” He placed the chip in his mouth, held his index finger up as he masticated.

“Though he is rather a ladies’ man, isn’t he?” Delahunty slapped her forearm lightly as he reached for another chip.

Phoebe stared at him. Did he think they were girlfriends now? “There is no frisson ... or whatever, between me and Dr Carver,” she said. She pulled the plate of chips towards her.

Delahunty grinned. “I have a very keen radar for these things and I would put money on the fact that Dr S— Dr Carver would like to ...” He shimmied suggestively and Phoebe felt like a snake had slithered across her foot.

“Don’t you have a portfolio to run?” she asked.



“Which doesn’t mean,” Calvin said, wagging his finger, “that I can’t take an interest in the lives of my friends.” He reached across the table and took another chip. “I’m just that kind of a person.”

“We’re not friends, Minister ...” Phoebe stopped short as Calvin, looking over her head, gasped and broke into a huge smile.

“Aha!” he said. “The good doctor himself!”

“*Oh god, please no,*” Phoebe whispered into her chips. She rubbed the corners of her mouth for any stray tomato sauce, checked her teeth with her tongue, pressed her cheeks with the backs of her hands, trying to cool them down.

“Dr Carver!” Delahunty’s voice echoed across the parquet floor and down the parliamentary corridor. “Good to see you! Phoebe and I were just trying to cure our hangovers.” He pressed the back of his hand to his forehead theatrically. “Care to join us?”

Most of the café patrons were now staring openly at their little threesome. Ruth Lopes caught Phoebe’s eye and gave her a wink. Phoebe stretched the sides of her mouth into a smile, nodded at Ruth and then turned to offer the same smile to Sam.

“Hi, Phoebe,” Sam said. “Good morning, Minister.” He stood there awkwardly. “I don’t want to intrude, I was just going to get a takeaway—”

“Oh takeaway schmakeaway!” Calvin said, slapping Sam on the back. “Sit *down*, doctor!”

Still, Sam hesitated. Phoebe realised he was looking at her for the go-ahead.

“Doesn’t bother me,” she mumbled into her chips, gesturing at the empty chair.

Calvin insisted on lining up to buy Sam's coffee. "It's only fair," he said, closing his eyes and giving a little shake of his head to show he couldn't be swayed, "I interrupted your conversation last night, so—"

"Sorry," said Sam, once Delahunty had left.

"For what?" Phoebe asked.

"Interrupting your ..." Sam waved his hand around the table.

"There's nothing to interrupt—" Phoebe said.

"Hey!" Sam yelped. Larissa appeared behind him.

"Keep your hands to yourself!" Sam said, looking like he wanted her to do anything but.

Larissa giggled, then spotted Phoebe, still sitting in front of her hot chips.

"Oh hi," she said, looking quizzically at Sam, "sorry, are you guys having a coffee?"

"No, no," Sam said, "I just bumped into Phoebe and the Minister—"

"We were just having a catch-up," Phoebe started.

Larissa cut her off. "Sorry, darl, that's my phone," she said, putting the mobile to her ear and mouthing "call me" to Sam before clattering away on her black patent heels.

"So, anyway, I'd better get going," Sam said as Calvin, on his way back to the table, announced his imminent arrival by having a loud and theatrical conversation with Ruth Lopes.

"Sure," said Phoebe, "got some lobbying meetings or...?"

"Yeah," Sam sighed, "just a couple of opposition senators."

"Oh god," Phoebe groaned. "Why d'you bother?"

Phoebe could see Sam's jaw muscles bulge as he clenched his teeth. He was *completely* not interested in her.

"I didn't mean ... that came out wrong," she said. "I'm sorry."

Calvin was air-kissing Ruth Lopes.

"Um listen," Phoebe said quickly, "I'm writing a feature on ... um ... life in a detention centre and I wondered if I could pick your brains a bit". Calvin was getting closer.

"Are you free tonight?" Phoebe hoped she didn't sound like she was begging. "It would be really good to get your input."

Sam was already flipping through the menu and sipping a beer when Phoebe arrived at the restaurant later that night. Phoebe was used to being the one kept waiting: if you weren't flat out in Canberra you pretended you were. People only wanted to know you if you didn't have time for them. But Sam didn't seem to care what impression he made, which of course, made him all the more unattainable.

"Drink?" he asked, beckoning the waiter over, "this Thai beer is pretty good ... or we could share a bottle of wine".

Phoebe ordered a beer.

"Yeah, look," Sam said, once the waiter had left. "sorry if I offended you last night. I don't know how we got into that argument—"

"You suggested I was sleeping with the Minister," Phoebe reminded him.

"Yeah, right," Sam grinned. "I'm sorry. I don't really think you're sleeping with the Minister. It was a stupid thing to suggest ... I don't know why I..." He paused and swallowed. Phoebe could see his Adam's apple bob up and down.

The waiter came back with her beer. Phoebe declined the glass, thanked the waiter and took a sip. She looked at Sam.

“*Really*,” he said. “I don’t think you’re sleeping with him. I never did.”

Phoebe raised her eyebrows. “Really?” she said. “You *never* thought it? Even for a second.”

“I really never thought it,” Sam said seriously. “For one thing, he’s an incredibly unattractive man ...”

“Oh come on,” Phoebe said, smiling. “You’re talking about Calvin Delahunty.”

Sam pursed his lips in mock-reappraisal. “He does have a fabulous high forehead—”

“And excellent hair,” Phoebe added.

“That too,” Sam conceded. “And actually, aside from the great hair, perhaps I underestimated him,” he lost the smile. “I mean at Central he seemed like a complete wanker. And last night he was, well,” he flashed his palm, in a gesture of surrender, “yes, OK, also a complete wanker... but maybe, I dunno, well, the way he’s releasing all those kids is really good.”

It was nice the way he said ‘good’, Phoebe thought. Like ‘gud’. Sam had stopped speaking. He put a hand on Phoebe’s arm.

“Hey, are you OK?” he said. “You look a bit hot—”

“Hmm?” Phoebe said, then realised she must have been staring and felt her face flush. “No, no, I’m fine,” she rolled her eyes. “It’s the beer. It goes straight to my face.” She held the empty bottle to her cheek to cool it.

“OK. It wasn’t? ... I know it sounds stupid, but I thought it was something I said about Calvin Delahunty,” Sam said. “Like I’d offended you by saying he was a wanker? Whatever, you just looked really weird.”

“Oh thanks!” Phoebe felt like she might throw up, but she forced herself to laugh. “Just what every girl wants to hear.”

Phoebe decided then and there that Sam could never find out what she’d done. He might not realise she’d done it for the children. He might think she’d done it for ambition or that she and Calvin were in some mutual back-scratching relationship, or ... or worse. She would not write any more stories about Calvin letting people go. She would get all her stories fair and square from now on. And she could too, there were enough people calling her with leads and story ideas for her to write twenty front pages. There would be no more talk about her being Calvin’s favourite journalist.

Sam laughed. “Sorry. Just giving you the objective journalistic truth. You *do* look really weird. And that beer really does go straight to your face! You’re bright red.”

“Oh ha, ha,” Phoebe said. “Very funny.”

“Actually you look pretty cute when you’re all red.”

Phoebe flushed more. “Even funnier!”

“OK,” said Sam, putting his hands up in a gesture of surrender. “I’ll not even notice you’re like a beetroot. NO, sorry, sorry. NO more red jokes ...”

There was an awkward silence as the waiter delivered the money bags.

Sam took a swig of his beer, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Oh hey, before I forget, I was going to ask your advice about this kid in Central. He’s pretty depressed, the rest of his family is still in Afghanistan except for an uncle ...”

Phoebe tried to look interested as Sam went on. She was sure that it was a terribly sad story, but she couldn't help feeling disappointed. For a moment, she had thought that maybe Sam was interested in *her* again, not just in what she could do for the refugees.

Sam grabbed her hand suddenly, "Sorry," he said. "I'm chewing your ear off."

"No, that's fine," Phoebe said, "I wanted to talk to you about the refugees—"

"That's right, I forgot ... the feature," Sam said. "But first," he leant across the table and grabbed Phoebe's face.

"Go like this," he said, licking his lips. Phoebe felt like someone had sat on her chest. She did as she was told.

"Now smile at me," Sam said.

She smiled.

"That's better." He let go of her face. "You had a shallot on your tooth." And then he leant across the table again and kissed her on the mouth.

## CHAPTER NINE

As soon as he was sure the Finance Minister had left, Calvin called Phoebe.

“Can I see you?” he whispered into his mobile, checking over his shoulder just in case.

Phoebe said she didn’t have time to meet.

“I really need to talk,” he whispered. “Now.”

Phoebe sighed static into his ear. “Can’t you just tell me later?” she said.

“No, I can’t!” Calvin snapped and then, remembering why he needed to see her, changed his tone.

“Please, Phoebe, it really is urgent this time,” he said. “It’s about the stories, your stories.”

Phoebe gave him the name of a chicken shop on the outskirts of Canberra.

“I’ll meet you there in half an hour,” she said.

Calvin had been surprised to hear from Cameron Robb’s diary manager. During all his time in Parliament, he had never even exchanged more than a brief hello with the Finance Minister. Robb was a party heavyweight, one of the PM’s henchmen. When his diary manager called to book Calvin in for a “catch up”, Calvin had taken it as further evidence of his own growing popularity.

Robb had been on the phone, one empty coffee mug already in front of him, when Calvin had arrived at the café earlier that day. Not wanting to look like he was awaiting the Minister’s favour, Calvin ordered himself a latte and pretended to check his phone messages while sneaking a look around the place. Martin Hennessy was there with

the Treasurer. *Again*, Calvin thought, giving the two men a little wave. Martin, known as ‘Hen’, nodded back then pointed to Robb, raised his eyebrows and spread his palms in a question. Calvin pretended not to understand the little pantomime. He giggled to himself. No doubt he could expect a call from Hen later that morning.

“Oh, just a catch up,” Calvin imagined himself telling the journo. “Robb and I go waaay—“

“Sorry,” barked Robb, snapping Calvin back into reality, “you get a coffee?”

“Oh yes,” Calvin replied, “...did you want another? ... I wasn’t sure—”

“No,” Robb barked again and Calvin marvelled at how much he sounded like Suitor. “This won’t take long.”

“Oh right,” Calvin nodded. “That’s good news, I am rather swamped at the—”

“Anyway,” Robb coughed. “Some of us are getting a bit worried about this whole refugee mission you seem to be on ...”

“Oh?” said Calvin, taking a sip of his latte to show he wasn’t upset. “I wouldn’t say I was on a mission, I was just using my ministerial dis—”

“Of course Immigration Ministers have used this section 417 before now,” Robb waved his hand, “but you seem to have been using it a lot.” Robb pulled a piece of paper out of his coat pocket, pushed his glasses up onto his head to consult it. “Thirty-eight from February to May compared to ...” he scanned the paper with his finger, “ah here it is, *none*, in the four months before that.”

Calvin started to say something about a backlog, but Robb waved his hand.

“Frankly,” Robb said, “the biggest concern is all the media coverage. It’s one thing to let the poor buggers go, but *telling* everyone you’re letting them go ... Other



ministers have used 417 of course, but I can't recall any of them making such a big fuss about it." Robb looked at him. Calvin could feel his eyelid twitching.

"And they've always waited for a briefing from the Department before making their decision," Robb went on. "But Judy tells me that you've granted some of these things before the Department has even had a chance to send you their report—"

"You spoke to Judy?" Calvin said, too loudly. He lowered his voice, smiled: "Speaking to another Minister's Dep. Sec., Cameron? That seems a little off protocol ..."

Robb cut him off. "We were at dinner," he said. "She has some concerns about the highly unusual way in which Section 417 has been used lately."

Calvin felt cold. He licked his lips.

"For example," Robb said, sliding him a piece of paper that Calvin recognised as a brief from the Ministerial Intervention Unit, "there was a Congolese boy—"

"George?" Calvin leant forward, "Why? What's he done?"

"Nothing." Robb leant back in his chair and observed Calvin as though he were an experimental subject. "But it seems you granted this boy a visa without waiting for the Departmental report?" Robb looked at Calvin expectantly.

"Actually, I did get the MIU briefing," Calvin said.

"Yes," said Robb. "Judy says you asked for the brief the night before the *Trib* announced you were planning to release George ... which wouldn't have given you much time to consider it ... or the concerns raised by the Department."

"Which particular concerns?" Calvin asked.

"Membership of certain red flag groups ..." Robb examined his face, "questions of character arising from certain allegations about his life back in the Congo."

“Well, let’s remember the boy was in the midst of the middle of a war, he’d lost his family and—”

“All valid points,” Robb said, raising his hands, “but what’s the harm in discussing them with the Department before announcing your decision to the media? Asking for more—”

“Now, hang on,” Calvin banged the table. “I never announced anything to the media. That story was *leaked*.”

Robb looked at him.

“Without my knowledge,” Calvin added.

Robb didn’t move.

Calvin felt like he was hooked up to a lie detector. What was it that was meant to make you look suspicious? Rubbing your ear? He forced himself to take another sip of his latte. Leant back in his chair.

“Ooops!” he said, with what he hoped was an endearingly naughty grin, “you got me! I guess the boy just tugged at my heartstrings ...” He spread his palms.

“So this George approached you personally?” Robb asked.

“No, no ...I mean his story tugged at my heart strings,” Calvin battled to keep the smile on his face.

“And you heard his story how?” Robb said.

“Oh gosh,” Calvin forced himself to laugh. “You’ve got me there ...advocate I think, lawyer, maybe ... You know I get so many of these damn requests it’s hard to keep track ...”

“It’s just that the usual method, as I understand it, is that the requests come into your office and the DLO faxes them straight off to the Department.” Robb was studying

his fingernails. He looked up quickly, *to catch my reaction*, Calvin thought. “Even if a request comes directly to a Minister, it’s very unusual for a Minister to make a decision without consulting his or her Department... Or alerting his personal staff.”

“Did Tara tell you that?” Calvin said. Bloody Tara; she was just miffed she didn’t control him anymore. He smiled.

“Look, *entre nous*, Cameron, I wouldn’t be at all surprised if Tara were a touch negative where I’m concerned,” he laughed. “She’s developed a *leetle* bit of a crush on me and I had to ... well, you know.” Did he sound over-defensive, Calvin wondered. He sighed. “Look Minis— Cameron, I can’t remember quite how I came to the decision to let this boy out. There’s not much more I can say really, only that it’s a busy job—”

“Right.” Robb cut him off. “My issue is that it opens the Government to questions.”

Calvin pulled himself up straight. He was conscious of Hen and the Treasurer a few tables away.

“We need to get on the front foot with this,” Robb went on. “The PM wants a report from you on the all 417s you’ve granted. We want dates, details of the case, who approached you, what influenced your decision, that kind of thing ... That way we’ll be prepared if reporters start asking questions or the Opposition starts making noises about higher refugee intakes.”

Calvin was speechless.

Robb waved the waiter over, handed him a credit card. “There was one other matter I wanted to discuss with you.” He coughed. “Noora Ahmed’s been asking around about you and Phoebe Valor?”

Calvin felt feverish. “Asking what specifically?”

“Whether you were having an affair.” Robb said it as though he were talking about accounting, but Calvin knew better than to think there was no danger.

Calvin snorted.

“Good,” Robb said. “Because if it were true—”

“It’s not true!” Calvin laughed.

“Given Valor has been the one breaking all these 417 stories,” Robb continued on, unperturbed, “Anyway, the two things together don’t look good. The sooner we get them cleared up the better.”

Calvin was the sole customer in Mr Wing’s chicken diner. Phoebe was late. He stared at his reflection in the greasy red lino. He had under-eye bags and his chin looked a touch flabby. He told himself it was only because he was looking *down* into his reflection. He was an attractive man. A good man. He didn’t deserve what was happening. What had he done wrong, but have mercy on some poor children? No doubt, he told himself, the opinion polls showed he was getting too popular. An old woman shuffled out from behind the counter and slid a basket of chicken wings and chips in front of him. Her hairnet did nothing to enhance his confidence in the place’s hygiene, but Calvin was in the mood to treat himself badly and punish Fate or God or whoever it was that was pulling the strings. He would no doubt get food poisoning and die from eating this crap, he told himself, not that anyone would care. Calvin chewed morosely on a soggy chip, and watched as a tear rolled down his lino reflection.

“So what’s the problem?” Phoebe threw her bag onto the bench seat and flopped in next to it. She looked at her watch. She didn’t even comment on the fact that Calvin had been weeping. “I can’t stay long.”

“I need to know your source,” Calvin said.

Phoebe shook her head and started to push herself up from the table.

Calvin put a hand on her forearm to stop her. “Really, Phoebe, I mean it,” he said. “Apparently there were some ‘irregularities’ with the way I approved the 417s—”

“What irregularities?” Phoebe asked.

“Ummm,” Calvin suddenly felt very tired. He tried to remember what it was Robb had said. “The Department didn’t give me a report—”

“Yes it did, I saw—”

Calvin patted the air in front of Phoebe’s face, trying to pacify her. “Apparently the Department hadn’t finished its assessment of some of the people I let go.”

“Well, maybe that’s because you didn’t want to sit around waiting for their bureaucratic bullshit,” Phoebe said. “Did you mention that?”

“No, I—”

“I mean, once you read the submissions from the Refugee Legal Service you were so moved you had to—”

“Your source told you this?” Calvin asked incredulously.

Phoebe stared at him, her mouth half open. “Are you kidding?”

“What do you mean?” Calvin said. “Kidding about what?”

“The source.”

“No,” Calvin said. “I’m telling you I need to know—”

“There *is* no source,” Phoebe said.

“What do you mean?” Calvin said. “In your stories you said a source—”

“I **AM** the source,” Phoebe said. “I made the source up.”

“*What?*” Calvin shrieked. Phoebe hissed at him to shut up, nodding towards a hairnet hovering, just visible, above the servery.

“What do you mean you made the source up?” Calvin whispered.

“Well it’s not like I could say *you* told me,” Phoebe snapped.

“But how did you know about the asylum—”

“It’s not that hard. I just asked the Refugee Legal Service which asylum seekers had appealed to the minister for a section 417, and when they’d applied. If they’d been waiting for a decision for more than six months I just assumed it had been through the Department and was waiting on your desk,” she paused. “It turns out things take a lot longer than I thought.”

“Well Tara has been a bit slack late—” Calvin began.

“Have you ever decided a 417 *yourself*?” Phoebe spat. “It is your job.”

“Well, of course I have,” Calvin blustered. Had he? He couldn’t remember. Surely ... “Maybe Judy’s pissed off we’re making her look bad?” he wondered aloud.

“That doesn’t matter now,” Phoebe snapped, rubbing her forehead between her index finger and thumb. “The question is what you’re going to do.”

“You mean what *we’re* going to—” Calvin began. Phoebe bared her teeth.

“Tell Robb you agreed with the legal service advice because it was so compelling it seemed unlikely the Department’s report would change your view.”

Calvin shook his head and despondently shoved some soggy chips into his mouth. “I said that, or sort of that, but he reckons ministers never make decisions without consulting the Department.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Phoebe said. “Tell Robb that according to the Act, 417 decisions are yours *alone* to make, despite what fucking bureaucrats say...”

“It won’t work,” Calvin said. “He was asking about how many people I’d let go and, and ... something about security concerns ... and he wanted to know why Tara didn’t know and then he asked about *us*—”

“Us?” Phoebe asked.

Calvin nodded.

“Like *us*, us?” Phoebe said.

Calvin nodded.

“Fuck!” Phoebe clenched her jaw. “Maybe if you’d shown some balls and made it clear that 417 allowed you to do whatever the hell you wanted.” She stopped speaking and stared at Calvin, her mouth open.

“Omigod,” she said. “I’ll bet you’ve never even read Section 417, have you?”

Calvin almost threw his basket of chips at her. She had started all this and now she was accusing him of being a coward? “I wouldn’t have *needed* to show my balls if you hadn’t let those people go—”

Phoebe looked at Calvin. “Let’s forget about your balls, shall we? ... Eat your chicken and let me think.” Calvin finished his chicken wings and licked his fingers. He looked expectantly at Phoebe who was running her index finger across the lino.

“That old rumour about Robb,” she said suddenly, bringing her finger to a stop. “That’s never been reported, has it?”

They decided Calvin would go and see Robb that night. He would give Robb the basic outline of a story he was prepared to leak to the press if Robb didn’t back off. It was an old story, but the gentility of the Canberra press gallery had so far kept it out of the papers. Calvin would say there had been some new evidence come to light, some video

footage of him leaving a certain establishment. *Keep it vague*, Phoebe said, *don't say anything about when this footage might have been taken*. They decided it would be better if Calvin didn't mention Phoebe at all. It was important, she said, that Calvin not concede or suggest in any way that *he* might have been acting improperly in letting detainees go. He was only threatening Robb now because something more important than both men was at stake: people's lives. It was a pity that Robb couldn't see that, but they couldn't let him get in the way of the good they were doing yada yada yada. Calvin had felt slightly uncomfortable about the plan, but Phoebe was right. Robb was threatening to undo all the good he'd done. If Robb had his way, George, Halani, Mo and all the others would be back behind the electric fence—or worse.



## CHAPTER TEN

Robb's body was discovered at 4am the next morning. A friend, unable to raise him, had called the police. The radio reporter said the police didn't consider the death suspicious, but neither did she say Robb had died from natural causes. Phoebe knew that meant suicide, though no one could say so until the coroner had made a ruling on it. She was driving to work when she heard. She'd woken late and hadn't had time to read the papers; they were still snug in their green cling-wrap in the back seat of her car. From the way the ABC reporter kept mentioning a "report in *The Standard*", it was clear the *Standard* had broken the story. Phoebe panicked briefly when she realized Damien hadn't rung to find out why she didn't have the story. Then she remembered he would have called Hen for anything to do with Robb or economics. There was nothing to link Phoebe to the Finance Minister.

Phoebe turned off the main road and parked in a side street to listen to the rest of the report. She had thought, hoped, that Robb might resign after Calvin's visit. She hadn't expected him to do anything this dramatic. As the ABC reporter interviewed an expert on stress, Phoebe flipped down the sunshade and inspected her mascara in the mirror. There were some black spots on her eyelids where she'd gotten too close with the wand. She dabbed her finger on her tongue, rubbed at the spots. Robb must have been very guilty about *something*, she thought. Maybe there was more to the ancient story than she'd known. Or more likely, she told herself, he was just a typical politician: more concerned about his reputation than anything else. She rolled her eyes at her reflection. What kind of a person would deny children the right to grow up in safety and away from fear? At least now he couldn't get in the way of what she was doing with the refugees.

Phoebe fossicked in her handbag for a lipstick. Her normal nude gloss seemed too weak for the mood she was in. She chose the red she'd bought for the One World ball. It had been three weeks and two days since dinner with Sam. Since he'd kissed her. Nothing else had happened. They'd caught a taxi to her place and he'd come in for tea and tried to talk his way upstairs. But she didn't want him losing interest the way some men did as soon as you slept with them. Plus, if she was honest, she wasn't sure she was all that good at sex. She always felt too embarrassed to really get into it, she didn't want to forget to hold in her tummy, or look weird when she moaned rather than looking sexy. As soon as they went to bed together, Sam would realize she was just not ... She couldn't think of the word. Not what he thought she was. Phoebe shuddered with embarrassment just thinking about it all. "Get *over it* Phoebe!" she hissed at the reflection in the rearview mirror. She belonged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. She shook her head and concentrated again on the lipstick. She applied the red in small, hard strokes, then put a tissue between her lips and pressed them together. She checked the mirror: perfect.

Delahunty was perched on the edge of the cracked leather couch, gossiping with Matilda and Gloria, when Phoebe arrived at the Bureau. She scanned the room for any evidence that Hen or the others had been in to witness her visitor: nothing.

"Morning," she said, trying for nonchalance. She dumped her handbag onto her desk. She nodded at Delahunty. "Hi, Minister."

"Did you hear about Robb?" Matilda asked.

Phoebe nodded. "Yeah, it's everywhere." She saw them waiting for her to say more. She shook her head in a show of disbelief. "Amazing."

“Hen’s covering it,” Matilda said. “But Damo wants me to do a ‘life and times’ piece ... you don’t mind do you?”

Phoebe shook her head. “Course not ...”

“Do you think I should mention the ... well, you know ...” Matilda turned to Calvin. “Sorry, Minister ... It’s just that it may have something to do with—”

“Totally understand,” Calvin said. He was squeezing his fingers one by one.

“Anyone else reporting it?” Phoebe asked Matilda quickly, trying to draw her attention away from Calvin’s hands.

“Everyone’s referring to ‘rumours’, but no one’s come out and told the story,” Matilda said.

“I’d wait and see what everyone else does tonight,” Phoebe said, turning on her computer. “But don’t take my advice. Ask Hen what you should do. Hey ... do you know how he did it?”

“Jeannie reckons pills,” Gloria said, referring to the receptionist over at the *Standard* as though she were a political editor.

“Really?” Calvin shrieked, turning to stare at Phoebe. He was wringing his hands now, *like fucking Lady Macbeth*, Phoebe thought.

“Phoebe—” he said.

“Nope.” Phoebe cut him off. She had to get him out of there before he said anything suspicious. “I haven’t forgotten. Are you ready to go now?”

Phoebe went straight to the lift and hit the button for the parking lot. There was no way she was going to be seen with Calvin anywhere near Parliament. He was like a caged animal on acid. She drove to a parking lot in the shadow of the Telecommunications

Tower where the only people they were likely to meet were retired bushwalkers. Phoebe cut the engine.

Calvin was shaking. A lot. Phoebe wondered if he was faking it.

“Minister,” she said. “I’m sorry if this sounds rude, but you should really calm down.”

“Excuse me?” Delahunty ran a hand through his wiry hair. “Calm *down*?” Robb is d ... he’s *dead* ...”

“Yes,” said Phoebe, “I know that. But it’s not like *we*—”

“But it happened after we told him we were going to—”

“Actually,” said Phoebe slowly, “it happened after you told him.”

Calvin grabbed at the base of his throat. “What? ... But you were the one—”

Phoebe raised her hands like she was settling a bull. “Calm *down*! How could you know he was going to do that? And it’s hardly your fault if he couldn’t handle his guilty conscience. Perhaps he should have thought of that before he did whatever he did ...”

Calvin stared at his hands. “You should have seen his face when I brought it up. He went all grey, like an old man—”

“Forget about it,” Phoebe said. “The only way you will ever be linked to Robb’s de— with what Robb did, is if you *panic* and act like you’ve done something wrong.” She lowered her voice. “No one knows you went to see him last night, do they?”

“No,” Calvin said uncertainly. Then he swallowed. He looked pale. “Hen. And the Treasurer. They saw me having coffee with Robb yesterday morning ...”

Phoebe shook her head. “So what? You had coffee with the guy ... Doesn’t mean you had anything to do with him topping himself.”

“But I *never* had coffee with Robb, we weren’t friends, it looked unusual. I *know* Hen thought it looked strange. He was giving me signals, asking me what we were talking about. He was wondering why we—”

“Oh God, would you shut up?” Phoebe snapped. “The guy killed himself. There is nothing to tie you to his death. If anyone asks, you say he asked you to have coffee cause he wanted you to slow down on the 417s in the lead up to the election. End of story.”

“I should tell the truth?” Calvin asked.

Phoebe shrugged. “Why not? Doesn’t make *you* look bad.”

Calvin stared at her. “You’re really not worried.”

“Nope,” said Phoebe. “I’m really not worried. We haven’t done anything wrong. In fact, what we’re doing is good. *We’re* saving lives ... Robb wanted to stop us. Remember that.”

Calvin nodded. Looked down at his hands. “I just wish—”

“Don’t wish,” Phoebe said sharply. “What are you going to wish for? That Robb didn’t muck around with that teenager? That you didn’t save Halani and Mo and George and the others?”

Calvin shook his head.

“Wishing is for people who are too scared to do what needs to be done,” she said, staring through the windscreen.

“I’m just,” Calvin stammered. “Well, it’s easy for you to sit there and tell me everything’s fine, but no one is going to ask *you* what you were doing having coffee with a chap you never spoke to, the very day before he died ...”

“Do I have to slap you?” Phoebe shoved her face in Delahunty’s. “You’re being hysterical. Now, here’s what’s going to happen. When I go back to the office I’ll let it slip that Robb slapped you down on the 417s. I’ll suggest Hen calls you. When he rings, tell him it would be inappropriate to disclose what you talked about with Robb now that he’s dead and can’t give his version. He’ll push. You’ll relent, but stress that it has to be off-the-record. Any stories have to be framed in terms of ‘*The Trib understands ...*’ blah blah. Then you admit Robb warned you over the 417s. Make a joke of it—yours was the last ass Robb ever kicked. It’s a tragedy, but ...” Phoebe looked at him. “OK?”

“OK” Calvin said. He nodded. Phoebe noticed his jaw set. *Thank God*, she thought.

“But ... Well, what am I going to do?” Calvin asked. “I mean *am* I going to pull my head in? ... On the 417s?”

“Just tell Hen you don’t want to comment any further,” Phoebe said, staring past the windscreen. “But suggest he might want to read Section 417 of the Migration Act. Tell him that will clear up any questions he might have.”

“But what—?” Delahunty asked.

“Section 417 is a non-compellable, non-questionable, non-reviewable, fuck-off-and-leave-me-alone power, reserved for the Immigration Minister,” she said. “If they want you to pull your head in, they’ve got to fire you or change the law.”

“It may seem strange to you,” Calvin said, shimmying himself up in his seat, “but I don’t particularly want to get fired.”

“They won’t fire you,” Phoebe said. She felt very tired. “That would make you a hero.”

Calvin cocked his head. “Oh,” he said. He stared out the windscreen. “Yes,” he said slowly, “I suppose it would.”

They were both quiet for a moment.

“Phoebe?” Calvin asked tentatively, as if afraid to wake her up. “That last arse he ever kicked joke ... I should tell Hen that’s off the record too, right?”

Robb’s death worked well for them in the end. Once Hen’s story came out and revealed Robb had been strong-arming Delahunty over asylum-seekers, there was not much sympathy for the Finance Minister. But it looked dicey for a while.

The day of Hen’s story, two days after Robb’s body was found, Calvin phoned Phoebe in a panic: the PM had called an extraordinary cabinet meeting. *It had to be about Robb*, he’d said. *Maybe someone had seen him going to visit Robb that night ... or Robb had left a note or something. What if they knew?* Phoebe told him to get a paper bag. Listening to his wheeze and the crackle of the bag, it occurred to Phoebe that Delahunty—not *her* Delahunty but this hyperventilating creature—was disintegrating. It was more than just the constant phone calls and the whining. It was physical. His face seemed pinker and shinier, his eyes wider, dumb-looking, and his mouth constantly open, little bits of spittle at the sides, like the parasitic mouth of a baby.

“Phoebe,” he wheezed, “the Cabinet meeting ... what am I going to say?”

Phoebe swallowed her disgust. “You’re going to say what you did to Hen,” she said. “If they want you to stop using Section 417, then they’ll have to fire you or change the law.”

“But ... but ... just give me a second—” Calvin wheezed into the bag again, “what if they ask me *why* I’m doing it?”

“Using 417?”

“Yes.”

“Just tell them you feel sorry for the kids.”

“But ... are you sure they’ll believe me?” Calvin whined.

“Of course they won’t believe you,” Phoebe snapped. “That’s not the fucking point. They want you to cave in to them and all you have to do is show them it’s not going to happen. You’ve got a big following now and they don’t want to be seen in opposition to you, so you let them know that if they want you to back off on the 417s, they’re going to have to stop you—publicly.”

“But what if they talk about the ... the irregularities in processing?” Calvin said.

“Tell them there can’t be irregularities with Section 417,” Phoebe sighed. “The Act makes it clear that under Section 417 you make a decision to grant refugee status on your own, however you like. The law does not say you have to consult the Department or anyone else. It is a non-compellable, non-reviewable power. You could pull a decision out of your ass and it would be completely lawful.”

“Hang on,” Calvin said, and Phoebe could hear the scrawl of pen on paper. “Can you repeat that last bit?”

Calvin called her straight after the meeting.

“The PM is under control,” he said importantly.

“Uh-huh,” she said, when it was obvious he was waiting for her to ask for more detail.

“Well,” Delahunty let a giggle escape, “you were right. I am *very* popular with the voters. At least I think I must be, because you should have seen the PM’s face—”



“So what happened?” Phoebe said.

“Oh, yes, right ... Well, I was the last minister to arrive and,” he giggled, “when I walked in, some of the chaps—and Lydia, bless her—gave me a round of applause! Can you believe it?” Calvin laughed. “The PM looked extremely pissed off ... anyhoo, he said some stuff about Robb, how it was really sad, yada yada ... and then I said some words too, which I think the others really appreciated, I’ve been told I’m quite good at eulo—what? Oh yes ... sorry ... so *then*, the PM says its an election year and we’re gearing up for the polls and one of the big issues is going to be border security ... and then Mike, that’s the Treasure—sorry, of course you know he’s the Treasurer—interrupts him and says ‘you mean racism?’.”

“What?” Phoebe said, rolling her eyes at the Uighur boy on her screensaver.

“Mike said the PM *really* meant one of the big issues was going to be racism ... Anyhoo, the PM was *not* impressed. He started saying no, it was about how Australians should be able to decide who lived here yada yada ... but Mike interrupts the PM again and says why doesn’t he just say what he brought us here to say which is that he doesn’t want me—as in *me*, Calvin—letting in the asylum seekers cause the rednecks don’t like it.”

“Uh-huh,” Phoebe said.

“So then there’s this huge argument and the PM says no it’s about the proper process being followed and then *I* corrected him and told him there *was* no set process for 417 and Mike and Lydia backed me up and Mike said that it had nothing to do with “fucking process” and the PM just wanted to be in control of who got to come to Australia which was why he wanted it to all go through the Department and take 100 years because then noone would get in.”

“That’s good,” Phoebe said, trying to sound disinterested in case Matilda was listening.

“Good?” shrieked Calvin. “It was a veritable revolution. The PM said he had polling which showed voters were worried we were being swamped by refugees etc and then Mike said he’d seen that polling and that was only in redneck seats and the same polls showed urban voters loved me—well, you know, loved that I was letting the refugees go...” Calvin caught his breath loudly. “Sorry. Just on my way to the café. Mike and I are talking numbers—”

“So what happened?” Phoebe asked.

“What?” he said.

“What did Cabinet decide?” She ground her jaw.

“Oh. Well the PM said rural MPs were going to be unhappy when they found out they were going to lose their seats and Mike said, ‘fucking pull the other one mate’—I *know*, I could hardly believe my ears!—he said it wasn’t like rurals were going to vote for the Progressives or the minor parties, except maybe the Shooters. We’re their only choice. He said it was the urban seats where I’m—that is me, Calvin—really popular that we’re most at risk.”

“So what’s going to *happen*?” Phoebe tried to speed him up.

“So Mike had been talking to backbenchers and he warns the PM that if he’s going to try to change the 417 law that there’s quite a few of us who will say publicly that we’ll cross the floor,” Calvin laughed.

“Hey!” he shouted into the mouthpiece. Phoebe jerked the phone away from her ear. “Mike! Over here ... Sorry Phoebe, must fly. Talk soon.”

The Treasurer's stand worked. There were no announcements from the PM, no 'leaked' stories about plans to toughen up the 417 powers. It was all very quiet. Still, just to be on the safe side, Phoebe held off on any further 417 stories. She didn't have much time for them anyway. Not after Bottie made her a political correspondent. He hadn't been able to refuse her. Not after she'd given him a list of her page one exclusives for the past four months. And not after she'd mentioned, very diplomatically, that chiefs of staff from other bureaus had been asking whether she was happy at the *Trib*, which of course, she assured him, she was. Especially after Bottie gave her a big raise to go with her promotion. Phoebe had to cover a much wider range of stories as a correspondent and then there were the analysis pieces and the extra contacts to cultivate and keep happy. On top of that, she'd been asked to do a daily spot on a commercial radio station and she was booked in to join the panel of one of the Sunday political shows in just over a month. They would have got her on sooner, the producer said, but they were locked in to using some old hack that they couldn't get rid of just yet.

She and Sam had been together a total of five times and they spoke on the phone at least three times a week. There still hadn't been any sex, but Phoebe was seriously thinking about suggesting a weekend away somewhere. The only fly in that ointment was the fact that Sam hadn't said a thing about her promotion even though it had been a few weeks, more than enough time for him to have noticed the new title under her byline. Phoebe didn't raise it, but she wondered whether he thought she had dumped the refugee issue. She made a mental note that she would still write about it occasionally, to show her interest was genuine.

It was a Thursday night. They'd been at the restaurant for over an hour and Phoebe had drunk one and a half glasses of wine, when Sam raised Tara.

"Oh hey!" he said, as if he had just remembered something. "Did you hear that Tara's quitting?"

"Really?" said Phoebe. "No, I hadn't." She shook her head. "Wow." She was pleased she hadn't heard. It was just further evidence for Sam that there was nothing going on between her and Delahunty.

"So ... how do you know?" she asked, taking another sip of her wine.

"Actually," Sam said. "Noora told me. She rang today—"

"To tell you about Tara?" Phoebe asked, suddenly sensing there was something more to this.

"Yeah," Sam said. "Well, sort of ... She said she wanted to ask my opinion ..."

"On?" Phoebe prompted.

Sam inhaled loudly. "Noora thinks Tara's upset because Delahunty never talks to her anymore—or anyone else in the office. Apparently Tara says he only ever talks to you."

"Oh." Phoebe said. "That's weird. And why did Noora tell *you* about what Tara said?"

"I think she wanted to see if I knew anything..." he trailed off.

"About me and Delahunty," Phoebe finished the sentence for him.

"I told her I didn't," Sam said quickly. "But then she said something else. Tara told her Delahunty went to see Cameron Robb the night before he topped himself."

"*Really?*" Phoebe hoped she sounded sufficiently surprised. She pulled her hair into a ponytail, to keep her hands busy.

“Yeah,” Sam said. “And Tara reckons Delahunty went to see *you* just before Robb—”

“He saw *me*?” Phoebe asked.

“Yeah,” said Sam. “I mean that’s what Tara told Noora.” He waited. He’s looking at me to see if I’m guilty, Phoebe thought.

“And then Robb killed himself?” she laughed. “Poor Tara ... she really is upset.”

“I know,” Sam said. But he didn’t laugh. “It’s ridiculous, but I thought I should at least let you know.”

“I’m glad you did,” Phoebe said softly, reaching for his hand. “Thank you ... Hey, I wonder ...”

“What?” said Sam.

“Nothing ... Well, I was just thinking ... you don’t think Tara and Delahunty ...”

“Were together?” Sam asked.

“It would explain why she’s gone a bit crazy now,” Phoebe said, as though the thought was just occurring to her.

“Yeah, maybe,” said Sam. “Interesting little place, Canberra.”

Phoebe was surprised by how easily things could be controlled. Before Tara had a chance to quit, Phoebe had Delahunty fire her for an affair with an Opposition backbencher.

Phoebe calculated, correctly, that her story was the closest that particular backbencher—a puffy, monosyllabic man in his late 20s—had ever come to a woman. And she took it, correctly, as a fairly safe bet the guy would not want to give up the kudos he’d earned for the alleged affair by admitting it had never happened. Phoebe also guessed, correctly, that Noora wouldn’t publish any of Tara’s allegations post-scandal: it would look like she was

giving airtime to sour grapes. It may well have been over-cautious, but Phoebe also had Delahunty nominate Judy for the International Council on Refugee Movements as well as for the Council presidency. Needless to say, Judy was delighted. She was also honoured by the flattering comments the Minister had made about her, which Phoebe duly reported. There was no way she was going to jeopardize her nomination or references by pursuing irregularities in the administration of 417 decisions.

The only problem was Sam. He hadn't called since her story about Tara was published. And that was eight days ago now. Phoebe had emailed him to explain how she'd called Delahunty that night, after she and Sam had spoken, and how he'd admitted he'd been planning to fire Tara over the allegations of her affair. Phoebe had explained to Sam that there was just no way she could sit on a story like that, even though it felt a bit weird, after she and Sam had been talking about it and all. But he understood, didn't he? The editor would kill her for missing it.

Sam hadn't replied.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Calvin had always thought of the Treasurer as rather sophisticated, but the paintings hanging on the pale blue walls of his office suggested otherwise: an Arthur Streeton, a Tom Roberts, and—god, had Mike even *heard* of modernism?—a Frederik McCubbin. On *his* walls, Calvin had a Minnie Pwerle and an Emily Kame Kngwarreye. Of course he'd chosen them before they'd been 'discovered' by the rest of the world and now that they were popular, someone else would probably nab them next time the National Gallery loaned out its reserves (the PM always got first pick, followed by the deputy, then Mike and then yada yada all the way down). It was just as well Calvin had already decided to swap his picks for some mash ups from Jumbo and Zap—and he'd be sure to get *them*, most of his colleagues were so out of touch they probably thought all graffiti artists belonged in gaol! Mike, bless his heart, was proof of that.

Calvin took a sip of his Glenmorangie, swung his feet onto the coffee table, and settled further into the leather couch to wait for Mike to finish briefing his chief of staff. He counted the number of times he and Mike had had drinks together: five, plus this evening. That made this the sixth time that Mike had invited Calvin for a drink since the two of them had joined forces on asylum-seekers. Not that their discussions were limited to refugees. The two men had become quite close. Indeed, Calvin suspected that Mike saw him as something of a confidante; it was, after all, to Calvin that Mike now turned when he needed to download about the PM taking all the budget glory or overruling him on the deregulation of something-or-other. And Mike trusted Calvin with some *highly* sensitive information like, for example, the fact that the Government had photos of the Chinese ambassador visiting brothels and that the foreign affairs minister had had an

affair with the 40-something-but-well-maintained minister of finance Sylvia Melkam (though Calvin had taken some convincing on this one, given poor Dicky's weight problem).

Suddenly, Calvin was in the know about unspoken cold wars, fatal character flaws and hidden dirt files that, back when he was dining out with Alistair and Marshall, he'd had no idea even existed. He found himself nodding the understanding nod of the insider whenever backbench colleagues complained about the low rate of foreign aid. He found himself saying, feet up on his coffee table, "look, I'd *love* to help out old chap, but trust me on this: it's a lost cause" or, "sorry, I *really* can't say why, but do trust me on this, don't waste your time."

There was a bang as the Treasurer's heavy wooden door swung open and hit the wall behind.

"Wendy, where's that bloody door jamb?" Mike shouted as he strode past Calvin to the drinks cabinet, poured himself a generous whisky and, as an afterthought, nodded in Calvin's direction. "Top up?"

Calvin, who was still swilling a sip round his mouth, tried to swallow it too quickly, precipitating an eye-watering, nose-running coughing fit. "Please," he croaked finally, holding up his glass.

Mike slopped some whisky into the glass and dropped into the opposite couch. He placed the crystal whisky decanter carefully next to Calvin's feet.

"That table is oak," he said.

Calvin pulled in his legs. "Oh sorry!" he said, "I thought I'd seen you— I mean— nothing, doesn't matter. Sorry."



Mike lifted his glass, tipped it in Calvin's direction. "Well, thank God that's over!" he said, downing half his drink.

"Here here!" said Calvin, taking a sip of his own whisky and wondering what was over.

"Honestly, if I'd had to listen to that old fart ponce on for one more second about how the *Government* had saved Australia from a full-blown recession ..."

Calvin nodded and rolled his eyes in long-suffering agreement. It occurred to him that when Mike imitated the PM, he sounded disconcertingly like Henry the Octopus from the Wiggles.

"At least he hasn't tried to bring up the 'refugee problem'," Mike made quotation marks with his free hand and Calvin noticed he wore a gold band on his index finger. Edgy, thought Calvin. He wondered if he could get away with it.

"Though how long we can bank on that holding ..." The Treasurer drained his drink, poured himself another generous nip.

"Yes," said Calvin, taking another sip. He was feeling rather lovely and fuzzy. It was such a blessing to have good friends like Mike as work colleagues, chaps that one could relax around, let one's guard down with.

"Sometimes I think all this refugee crap is just the PM trying to hurt me," Mike said. "I mean, how does he think it makes *me* feel when he goes on about being swamped with refugees?"

"I know," Calvin agreed.

"Or when he says all that bullshit about asylum seekers being a drain on the country's resources? Is he actually suggesting that *my family* is a drain?" Mike scoffed.

Mike and his two brothers were heirs to one of Australia's largest fortunes, amassed by his grandfather, an Ukranian refugee.

"Sometimes I think I should just call him on it—publicly. You know, just ask him straight up, whether he is referring to me!"

Calvin laughed and shook his head. It buzzed.

"Fuck," Mike said.

"S'mmmmm," Calvin mumbled.

"So have you let any more kids go?" Mike asked. "I haven't seen anything in the papers last few weeks."

Calvin was surprised out of his buzz. "Umm, no. No, I haven't ... Just, well, you know, been so rushed off my feet..."

Mike didn't say anything. He looked at Calvin, like there was something he didn't understand. And then he just kept looking, not saying anything, like one of those horrible interviewers trying to get you to say something incriminating.

"I mean, obviously, of course, I have a few that I'm considering," Calvin stammered, "In the pipeline as it were. Hoping to get them out in the next few weeks." He drained his glass.

"Good," Mike said. He shook his head. "I hate to think of kids locked up in those shitholes ... it's just barbaric ..."

Calvin shook his head to show he too thought it was barbaric. What was Phoebe up to, he wondered. She hadn't written about him for five and a half weeks. Not since before Robb ... He shook the memory away. And it wasn't just the children; Calvin hadn't made any stirring speeches, visited any refugees; he hadn't done a thing.

Calvin called Phoebe as soon as he left Mike's office, but she'd diverted her mobile to the *Trib's* receptionist, Gloria, who self-importantly informed Calvin that Phoebe was on deadline. When Calvin rang back half an hour later, Gloria was still on the other end. This time, she harangued him about health premiums for a full ten minutes before informing him Phoebe was still working. Calvin politely pointed out that it was past seven, which he knew for a fact to be the *Trib's* deadline. After a brief pause, Gloria said Phoebe was doing a re-write for the late edition. "I'll tell her you called again", she snapped, and hung up before Calvin could tell her it was urgent.

Calvin booked himself on a later flight to Melbourne, picked up some sushi and went back to his flat. When Phoebe still hadn't called by 9.30, Calvin sent her a text message. Half a minute later, she rang. He could hear music and voices in the background.

"They've got you working hard!" Calvin said, trying to sound genuine, though a less generous man than Calvin might have concluded Phoebe had been lying about the deadline.

"Yep," Phoebe said. She sounded cranky. Not that Calvin could blame her. He felt funny talking to her too, after the whole thing with Robb.

"So .... How're you enjoying the new role?" he asked. "They've got you chasing the health reforms, have they? Lucky you—!"

"What did you—"

"Yes, yes. Sorry. You must be enormously busy! Totally understand! I'll be quick. So, anyway, I was having a drink with Mike, you know the Treas—Sorry, of course you know he's the Treasurer... anyway he asked whether I had released any more children of

late, which got me to thinking ... well, I haven't really, and I wondered if maybe we should..." he petered out.

"Wondered if we should what?" Phoebe asked.

"Well, you know, let some children go?"

"Sure, yeah... good idea," Phoebe said unenthusiastically.

"Terrific!" Calvin said, "so will you send me a draft story or?"

"Sorry, no can do," Phoebe said, "Vodka lime thanks ... Sorry, what was I saying? Oh yes. I can't do it. Snowed under as it is. But I'm sure Noora or Larissa would run a story, if you let someone out."

"Yee-es," Calvin said, "I just thought—"

"That I could do all the work for you?" Phoebe said.

"Oh Phoebe! You're too funny!" Calvin brayed. Why did she have to be so difficult? It wasn't like she wouldn't benefit from the exercise; she'd be giving *herself* an exclusive too. "I just wanted to give you first dibs, you know, a sign of appreciation for past assistance ..."

"Oh well, thanks for the gesture," Phoebe said. "But I'm good."

"Right." Calvin cast around for something to say. "Well, if you're sure—"

"I'm sure," Phoebe said.

"No problem. No problem at all," Calvin tried to sound casual. "Listen, just while I've got you ... I don't suppose I could get a copy of your list from the Refugee Legal Service? I seem to have misplaced mine."

The next morning, having cancelled his flight home, Calvin went to his favourite Canberra café, ordered eggs Benedict and a skim latte and opened the refugee file, which

Phoebe, after a distressing amount of begging on his part, had slid under his office door the previous night.

At the next table, three young women (university students, judging by their still-glowing skin and slummy clothes) whispered and took turns sneaking looks in his direction. Calvin flashed them a smile.

“Excuse me?” asked a skinny blonde. “I’m sorry to bother you, but ... are you Calvin Delahunty?”

“The one and only,” Calvin brayed. The girls tittered politely.

“Well, we just wanted to say that like we think it’s very cool that you’re letting all these kids out of detention. If we lived in your suburb” she waved her hand, “like, I mean, your voting *area* ... we would definitely vote for you, even if you are a Conservative. If it weren’t for you, we’d be, like, embarrassed to be Australian at the moment.”

The other two girls nodded.

“Oh, I’m just doing my job,” Calvin said, wondering whether he could switch tables to join them, offer to tell them a bit more about what he did ... maybe take them up to his apartment ... *God Calvin!* He gave himself a mental slap on the wrist. Though, if he wanted to, he was pretty sure he could ... He gave himself another mental slap, giggled at his incorrigibility.

The girls thought he was giggling at them and smiled uncertainly.

“Anyway,” Calvin said, gesturing at the file in front of him, “children to save and all that...”

The first applicant was a 14-year-old Afghani girl. Her mother and aunt had paid to have the girl smuggled to Australia where they had family and she could go to school without

fear of being punished by the Taliban. Sitting in the crisp Canberra sunlight, Calvin imagined the girl's mother paying the smuggler, hugging her child goodbye, realising she might never see her again. His eyes welled. He was surprised by how much the story had affected him. And pleased; *he* was not one of those heartless politicians just in it for the power. Calvin raised his head slightly so the university girls could see the tears glistening on his face. Then he scrawled 417 across the top of the sheet and underlined it twice.

Over the next half hour, Calvin cried twice more and, on paper at least, released nine out of nine asylum seekers. Then he got to the file on the Afghani boy, Mohammad. Calvin gazed at the boy's photo, the better to summon up his pity; he could feel the girls' eyes still on him. Mohammad was meant to be 15, but he looked much younger. How the child could possibly be a risk, Calvin didn't know. He just looked *so* innocent, *so* baby-faced; though, Calvin mused, if *he*, Calvin, were a terrorist, Mohammad was exactly the kind of person he would recruit to carry bombs. Were terrorists that clever, he wondered?

Calvin pushed the rest of his eggs away. He studied Mohammad's photo more closely. Was the child too good to be true? Of course, Calvin reassured himself, the Department had already done an initial security check and, if there had been any concerns at all, Mohammad would have been sent packing. Plus, Calvin could always ask for an additional check. Then he remembered that he—that is, Phoebe—had never asked for an extra security check before now, so it would be sure to raise suspicions if he requested one out of the blue. And even if he *did* ask, what were the chances of such a check actually uncovering a terrorist? Terrorists these days were very clever about getting around checks. Like that man that blew up the army base in the US. *He* was a model citizen before he dressed up in gelignite. What if Calvin let Mohammad stay and then the boy did something terrible, like bombing the Opera House? Calvin imagined himself

fronting the media, trying to be heard over all the shouted questions, trying to explain that yes there *had* been a security check on the bomber, but it hadn't found anything untoward. He tried to think what Phoebe would get him to say. She would certainly get him out of any tight spots. Give him an excuse or a justification. Probably even make him more popular than he already was

Calvin wasn't sure he could do so well without Phoebe. In fact, he was quite certain that he could *not*. He closed the manila folder. He would not let any more children go after all. And if anyone asked, he'd just say there was a dearth of deserving candidates.

Calvin signalled for the bill and began shuffling the files back into their folder. Nassim's passport photo caught on the manila and as Calvin tried to free it, she stared accusingly at him. Above her large dark eyes, her forehead was scored with worry lines. And she was just 14. What would happen to her if Calvin *didn't* let her go, he wondered? Would she be kept under house arrest? Promised to some crusty old man? Burnt if she didn't comply? What if, told she was to be sent back home, Nassim tried to do what Halani had? What if she succeeded? What would he *say*?

No doubt Phoebe could have him say something sympathetic, something restorative. *She* could prevent the whole situation from happening in the first place. The truth was, he realised, Phoebe did Calvin better than he did. *His* Calvin didn't know what to do. He didn't want to make the wrong decision. He didn't want to play God. Oh horrible, horrible 417! He never even asked for the stupid power anyway. Why did they even have it? How could one person do better at deciding someone's fate than fifty public servants with their forms and their computer checks and no public looking over their shoulder and questioning their every move?

“Keep up the good work!” the university blonde shouted after him as Calvin pushed away from the table. She made a V with her fingers. Calvin raised his fist to shoulder height and flipped a V, big enough for the girls to see but small enough to be deniable.

There was nothing else for it. He just had to get Phoebe writing again.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

It was Monday morning and Phoebe was late. Extremely late. The rest of the Bureau was in the middle of the Monday news-planning meeting when she arrived. Matilda was saying something about drug testing in sport, the *Trib's* issue *du jour*. Phoebe wheeled her chair into the circle that had formed around Hen's desk, mouthing excuses and rolling her eyes to indicate how the Universe had conspired against her arriving on time. Hen didn't look up.

"So, MacPherson's promised me the drop on that," Matilda said, ticking off something on her reporter's notepad.

"He's not giving it to anyone else?" Hen barked.

"Nope," said Matilda, "we've got it to ourselves. I reckon it's a front page contender."

*Of course you do*, thought Phoebe, fiddling with the Myer's receipt on which she'd scribbled her ideas for this morning's meeting.

"Excellent!" Hen barked again. "And what about that interview with the Sports Minister?"

"Scheduled for Thursday," Matilda said, sucking her braces. "He's promised me some good stuff on the doping committee. Exclusive," she added. As though, Phoebe thought, she'd only just remembered that part. "Definitely front page material."

"That's what I like to hear," Hen said. "Good stuff, Matilda." He looked up and saw Phoebe. "Ah, Phoebe, thank you for gracing us—"

"Sorry I'm late," Phoebe adopted a slight puff, to show how she'd rushed to get there, "the papers didn't come and—"

Hen sighed loudly. “Can we get on with it? I’ve got to see a contact at 11.”

“Oh sorry. Um, so,” Phoebe scanned her receipt for something legible, trying to keep the redness out of her cheeks. “We’ve got the drop on a new refugee case that the minister—”

“Delahunty?” Matilda asked.

“Yes, um, that Delahunty is looking at releasing,” Phoebe stammered.

“I think we’re over the whole refugee story aren’t we?” Hen asked.

“It’s a new family, from Africa, a really full-on story—”

“I’m sure it is,” Hen said. “But we’re still over it.”

Phoebe’s eyes smarted.

“Didn’t Bottie say no more refugee stories?” Matilda asked Hen, dangling her Prada glasses from her fingers.

“Yep,” Hen barked. “Anyway, Phoebe, the reffo thing is a bit small target for a political correspondent.” Phoebe could hear Matilda suppress a giggle. “Concentrate on getting meatier stuff. More exclusives, bigger picture ... how did you go with the Defence Minister’s people?”

Phoebe had left eight messages with the Defence Minister’s people. “Just trying to tee up a time that suits,” she said and something jerked in her peripheral vision.

“You right?” Hen was addressing Matilda.

“Sorry!” Matilda said. “I just remembered something I had to tell Phoebe ... it’s about defence ... but it’s probably not important—”

“Go on,” Hen said.

“It was just ... well, I had coffee with Rachel this morning,” Matilda said, “you know, the Minister’s PR. And Phoebe, Rachel told me to tell you she’d got all your

messages and she'd call you when she got a chance." Matilda's eyes turned faux-apologetic. "Actually? She said to ask you to stop," and here Matilda made quote marks with her fingers, "harassing them".

The room was silent.

"Oh. OK," Phoebe said. "Thanks."

"This sounds bad," Hen cracked his knuckles. "Are we on the nose with the Defence Minister?"

"Oh not at all," Matilda said, "Rachel is so sweet, *really* helpful."

"I...I... don't have a problem," Phoebe stammered.

"Well there's obviously *something* going on," Hen said. "They've clearly got an issue ..." *with Phoebe*, Phoebe silently finished the sentence for him.

"Do I need to talk to Carter's people to get them to talk to you?" Hen asked Phoebe.

"No," Phoebe said.

"Good," Hen barked. "Cause that would look fucking stupid."

"Hen? I could do the interview with Carter," Matilda said. "I've got a really good relationship with Rachel ... and that frees up Phoebe to do her refugee stuff—"

"No! I mean ... I don't need freeing up," Phoebe said, trying to keep her voice from breaking. "I can do it. I just haven't got through yet. Hen, you don't have to call ... just let me have it a few more days. I'll let you know as soon as Rachel calls me back."

"OK, but we need it this week," Hen rasped. "We don't want the fucking *Standard* getting the jump on us again."

Phoebe didn't point out that *The Standard's* political correspondent, (Leila Singh, who had last week broken the news that the Defence Minister was planning to cut troop

numbers across two wars), had been in the job for five years as opposed to Phoebe's two minutes and probably had a very supportive editor and colleagues.

"No problem," she said, looking down at her shopping docket. "Um also, the Senate Committee on Human Rights is releasing its report about detention centres ... it should be pretty explosive ... lots of stuff about mental health of the detainees."

"Can you get the drop on it?" Hen asked.

"Um. I can talk to—"

"This is a really important report," Hen interrupted.

"I know—" Phoebe began.

"The UN will be all over it. Plus any lawyers keen on a class action," Hen said.

"Yeah," Phoebe tried again, "And—"

"We need to find out what's in the report," Hen hadn't even heard her.

"Leila will be onto it already," Matilda said helpfully.

"Phoebe you need to be calling everyone on that committee," Hen added.

"But the chair has made them all promise not to talk—" Phoebe said.

Hen cut her off. "Someone will talk," he said. "Make sure it's to us. Get them drunk, go to their house; I don't care what you do ... Shit! It's ten to. Let's get this thing wrapped up. Pete? What's on your radar this week?"

The economics correspondent sucked phlegm down the back of his throat. "RBA meeting this Tuesday," he said through his nose. "Interest rates certain to rise—"

If only she were an economics correspondent, thought Phoebe. She could just sit back and wait for the latest economic data to appear in her inbox, pass the time by thinking up new and literary ways to say 'rise' and 'fall' and, best of all, be positively *forbidden* by market-sensitivity laws from having to break stories.

“...Thanks everyone,” Hen barked. “I need your week-ahead lists by lunch. Plus your briefings for tomorrow.” He turned his back, hunched over his computer and began stabbing loudly at his keyboard. The planning meeting was over.

“That sounds like a great yarn,” Matilda said as she and Phoebe sat down at their desks.

“Sorry what?” Phoebe hit pause on her phone messages.

“The human rights report,” Matilda said. “And don’t worry, I’m sure you’ll get the drop on it... I mean just look at all those immigration stories you broke ...”

“Thanks,” Phoebe mumbled.

Matilda leaned over the partition separating her desk from Phoebe’s. “Just ignore Tom and Larissa,” she whispered. “Everyone knows that stuff about you and Delahunty is bullshit. You got those stories because you’re a great reporter. And you’re a *great* political correspondent.”

How satisfying it would be to tell Matilda to fuck off, Phoebe thought. How wonderful to king-hit her right in the middle of her spit-filled braces.

“Thanks, Maddy,” Phoebe smiled. “That’s really sweet of you to say.” And before Matilda could utter any more insincerities, Phoebe escaped the Bureau.

The Meditation Room had once been called the Prayer Room (it had also once been a den of pot-smoking and illicit liaisons before a crack down by overzealous public servants), but the politically correct name change and the installation of a bookshelf offering leaflets on Buddhism and Hinduism alongside a Koran and a Bible had done little to increase patronage and, as usual, Phoebe had the place to herself. She stumbled down carpeted steps into the dug out, fell into one of the pews and let go of the sob she’d

been holding onto for the past 15 minutes. She allowed herself two more and then told herself to shut up.

“You’re an idiot, Phoebe,” she hissed, setting off a fresh round of self-pity. If she could just go back to being a rounds reporter, to competing with Noora—grumpy on the outside, but so lovely and soft underneath!—and ditzzy Larissa and goofy Tom! It seemed the very definition of happiness. But she was stuck. She was the one who had insisted on being made political correspondent; giving it up now would be admitting she couldn’t handle the job and she’d never get the chance again. She’d be shoved off to some obscure round and forgotten about. That was if she wasn’t actively managed off the paper or onto Special Advertising Reports.

Phoebe stared through the turreted glass window and down into the Senate Courtyard where, three floors below, Matilda and Hen were sharing a smoke. Matilda hadn’t taken up the habit until she arrived in Canberra a year ago. Now, she was “popping out for a fag” every half hour. And every time she blew back in, she brought a new story or rumour along with her stale smoke. Every night, she was out at the drinking holes frequented by politicians and staffers, working her contacts like a mercenary. She was desperate to get her hands on Phoebe’s job, of course. And she was ruthlessly ambitious; the only thing Matilda gave a shit about was being famous. The old romantic notion of a journalist being an agent of social justice was completely lost on Matilda. She just wanted to flick her hair around on the weekend news shows. Stuff helping people! Stuff trying to make the world a better place! And truth? Who gives a shit about the truth? Phoebe could not think of a single story Matilda had written to actually *help* someone. Sure, she went on about that pissy little award she’d won for the series on

Northern Territory indigenous communities, but she'd only *done* the series because indigenous stories always won awards.

A small bubble of discomfort rose in Phoebe's chest. She swallowed. *She* had entered her refugee stories in the Press Club awards. But that was only because Sam said it would raise awareness of kids in detention. *Wasn't it?* Phoebe pushed the suspicion away, desperate not to let it form into conscious thought. Of course she'd entered to raise awareness! The awards had never occurred to her before Sam gave her the idea, let alone before she *wrote* the stories. She had written those stories to help the kids. The bubble rose again. Hadn't she? Yes, she had! And even if she had thought about awards while she was writing, it was only because of the sad reality that you had to win awards to be a respected journalist who can then write whatever she wants and thus help change the world.

Not that Sam understood that concept. She was sure—though he wasn't talking to her, so couldn't tell her outright—that he thought Phoebe had dropped the refugee issue now she was a correspondent. He had no idea how hard it was for her. It wasn't that she didn't *want* to write about refugees, but she wasn't helping anyone by writing stuff that didn't get a run. As soon as she'd established her reputation as a correspondent she could write anything she wanted. She'd go back to the refugee stories then.

Phoebe's phone trilled. Delahunty. She shuddered at the thought of him: the one and only cabinet minister who would talk to her. She rejected the call.

Three floors down, Matilda and Hen were walking back into the building. Phoebe had to get herself together. She had to think strategically. She had to get this fucking report. She *had* to get this interview—

Her phone rang again. “Fuck off!!” she hissed through a clenched jaw, rejecting him again.

The phone beeped with a text message. Phoebe let out a low scream. Angry tears welled in her eyes. She stared at the display. “NEED 2 C U ASAP. CUD B A PROBLEM.” And then something—maybe the incredible nerdiness of Calvin Delahunty using text language—cheered Phoebe up slightly. She’d make Carter talk to her somehow.

In the reception area of Calvin’s office, the young blonde receptionist sat staring, catatonic, at a computer screen. The phone was quiet. A balding Pakistani man sat, eyes closed, on the Chesterton couch, a *Community & Calvin!* newsletter unopened on his lap. Phoebe had not been in Calvin’s office since before Tara was fired. Back then, the phone had rung off the hook, the staff had shouted—at one another, at phones, at computers—and the lobbyists had networked and jostled for space. Now it was like a ghost town. Or a ghost office.

Before Phoebe had even asked to see him, the door to Calvin’s office creaked open and his shiny pink head peered around it. Like a cowboy sticking out his hat to gauge enemy firepower, Phoebe thought. Catching sight of the Pakistani man, Calvin jumped as though having a lobbyist in his office was the last thing a minister might expect.

“Ah! Sayed!” he said, waving. “Sorry to keep you waiting, old chap. Bit of urgent business. Shouldn’t be long.”

Blustering over, Calvin ushered Phoebe into his office, closed the door, then swivelled the window shades closed.



“Sit down, sit down,” he said, perching awkwardly on one end of the couch.

“Thanks for coming—”

“I can’t stay,” Phoebe said.

“No, of course, of course. I assumed that,” he said. “Look. I won’t beat around the bush. The thing is. Ahhh. Is ... Is I need you to write some more stories about me letting people go—”

“That story is over,” Phoebe said. “No one’s interested.”

“Right, yes.” Calvin nodded. “I suspected as much. Horribly fickle, the public. The thing is, Mike’s getting suspicious. You know, that I was doing so much and now ... Well, now nothing is happening. He’s been asking questions.”

“So ... then you just let some asylum seekers go,” Phoebe said slowly.

Calvin appeared as though he was trying to laugh, but all that came out was a squeak. “The thing is, Phoebe, you’re just so much *better* at it than me.” He smiled. “I’m afraid that if clumsy old me tries my hand, it will be obvious that the earlier work wasn’t mine ... and then everyone would know our little secret.”

“How hard is it to tell someone they can stay?” Phoebe wondered, half to herself.

“Oh, I know, I know,” Calvin squeaked, “pathetic isn’t it? What can I say? I’m bureaucratised! Institutionalised. Whatever –atised it is.”

Phoebe stared at him. “Maybe—” she said.

“Maybe what?” Calvin asked.

“I *might* be able to get a story up,” Phoebe said slowly.

“Oh thank God!” Calvin clapped his hands. “I mean, that’s great ... You know, Phoebe, you should think about getting into politics yourself. You’d be great at it. And, of course, if you ever needed a hand—”

“But you have to do something for me first,” Phoebe said.

“Oh, of course!” he said. He leant forward conspiratorially, “name your price, madam!”

Phoebe stared at him. How did an idiot of this magnitude help run the country?

“Sorry,” Calvin said. “Just a little joke. A stupid, not-very-funny joke. Sorry ... So, what do you want me to do?”

“You can get me an interview with the Defence Minister.”

Calvin’s eyes stretched wide. “With Colonel Carter?” he said.

“Yes.”

“But he only talks to—”

“And I want a copy of the report from the Human Rights Committee—”

“That’s being released on Thursday?” Calvin asked.

“That’s being released on Thursday,” Phoebe said. “But I want it tomorrow. Latest.”

“Phoebe I don’t think—”

“Those are my terms,” Phoebe said, pushing herself up from the Chesterton.

“Give me a call when you’ve got something.”

Calvin called just after 5pm.

“Phoebe?” He was breathing fast. “I’ll tell you the details later ... *in person*, if you know what I mean, but ... those ... ahhhh ... *interview questions* I said I’d get back to you about? That’s a yes to both.”

“Great,” said Phoebe.

“And so when can you ... do that thing we talked about?”

“I’ll let you know,” Phoebe said. “First things first. You in your office?”

Phoebe didn’t ask how Calvin had got the Senate Committee report or how he had managed to get Salvador Carter, the most reclusive minister in Parliament, to agree to an interview. She didn’t care.

She picked the best stuff out of the Report’s executive summary and wrote an exclusive just in time for the first edition. She added extra stuff from the report for the second and third. She had probably missed the most crucial parts (not having had time to actually read the report), but she’d done her job. She’d got it before anyone else. Even if she’d missed the main point, the other newspapers wouldn’t write about the report now. They’d lost the game.

The next day, when Phoebe turned up to interview Carter, Rachel offered to go and buy her “a proper coffee” from the café and the Colonel only kept her waiting for five minutes. Carter had been dubious, he admitted, when Calvin Delahunty had insisted Phoebe was the next big thing in political journalism. *For one thing*, the Colonel said, *the man is a half-wit ... but he may have been right about you*. Thus reassured about Phoebe’s up-and-comingness, Carter (Colonel was a nickname) proved to be a very forthcoming interviewee. Hen and Bottie were duly impressed with the inside running he gave Phoebe on the upcoming purchase of some very technical-sounding aircraft and rewarded her with her second front-page lead in two days. Matilda avoided her.

Now that the virtuous circle of journalism was in motion, Damien quickly agreed to Phoebe’s story on the new alliance between the Treasurer and the Immigration Minister. Phoebe obviously knew her stuff, so if her sources were telling her the numbers were changing enough to put the PM on shaky ground, *then yep, go ahead, do the story*. It was

not difficult to slip into said story a mention of Peter Mombibo, an African refugee Delahunty had just released using his 417 powers.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The evening news had been running for less than ten minutes when the phone rang.

“I’m not here!” Calvin yelled at the closed door. The phone rang again.

“I *said* I’m not here!”

The phone went quiet. Then Calvin’s mobile flashed. It was Suitor. The PM’s chief of staff hadn’t rung him since the day Calvin and Mike had rolled the PM in cabinet. No doubt he was *aching* to pull rank again. Calvin pictured Suitor’s clenched jaw, his belligerent jowls; he was probably pleased that poor young doctor might have HIV—just so long as it gave him an excuse to get back at Calvin. Horrible man. Calvin let the phone ring out. But no sooner had it stopped flashing, than it began again, this time with Mike’s name in the display. The Treasurer’s disappointment was no more appealing to Calvin than Suitor’s bullying. He let it keep flashing.

Calvin stared at the phone until his eyes watered. This was bad. Very bad. In fact, it was *so* bad that if Calvin weren’t a sensible man, he might have wondered whether there weren’t some horrible right-wing god pulling the strings somewhere just to spoil all the fun and stop him from letting any more refugees slip into the country. Calvin rolled his eyes at the TV screen on which Larissa Lipton had her arm around the sobbing young doctor (he hadn’t caught her name). *Oh please!* Calvin muttered. He couldn’t wait to see Larissa and give her a piece of his mind. This was just the worst kind of sensationalist journalism. Though, of course, Larissa wouldn’t have had anything to sensationalise about if it weren’t for Phoebe bloody Valor letting the man into the country. Calvin sucked his teeth. How do you *not notice* the words HIV-positive on the top of a file? Not

even his brainless receptionist could have missed something like that. And how do you *not* notice the fact that the man was obviously unhinged enough to get into a fight and get himself stabbed? Unless, Calvin thought suddenly, Phoebe had *not noticed* on purpose. She *had* been acting like the Queen of Sheba ever since she'd been made a political correspondent.

"Political correspondent" Calvin whispered, mimicking Phoebe with her pretentious little accent on "dent", her batting eyelashes. He snorted. She acted as though being a correspondent was more important than being a minister! Well, she wasn't going to get away with this. He picked up his phone and dialed Phoebe's office number. That little bitch had got him into this mess; she was bloody well going to get him out of it.

"Phoebe," he said curtly, trying to mimic the way he had spoken when he was still the relationship's powerbroker. "It's Calvin."

"Something wrong with my mobile?" Phoebe asked.

"Um, Yes," Calvin said, reaching for his inner steel. "Try: you never answer it." That was more like it. "Peter Mombibo had HIV?"

"Yep. That's what the TVs are reporting, so—" Phoebe said. Calvin could hear her typing. Unbelievable! She didn't even care!

"Right," he said. "And did you know this when you ..."

"Hmmm. I wonder," she said, still typing. "What do *you* think?"

"Frankly, Phoebe, I don't know what to think," Calvin said. "I mean, is it *difficult* to notice H.I.V. written across the top of someone's file? Because it doesn't *seem* difficult."

Phoebe sighed. "Yes, I suppose you're right." Calvin noted that she didn't sound at all *sorry* that he was right.

She continued: “It probably *would* have been better if you’d done your own work. As I mentioned before, I’ve quite a lot on ... what with being a political correspondent and all ... Speaking of which, I really had better get this story finished—”

“Hold on a *minute*,” Calvin said, struggling to stay powerful in the face of Phoebe’s disinterest. “You can’t just leave me to deal with this. You have to write something for tomorrow, something to make it better—”

“Actually,” said Phoebe. “I can. And I won’t.”

Calvin was confused. “So you *will* write something? Oh thank Go— I was a bit worried for a moment there. Can you say the file was wrong or—”

“No,” Phoebe snapped. “I said I’m *not* going to write something to make it better. You deal with it.”

Calvin gasped. “But ... But ... You were the one who—”

“The one who what?” Phoebe asked. “Wrote about your decision? You know, just because I reported on it, doesn’t mean I support it. Frankly I’m as shocked as the next person that you were so sloppy. I mean, maybe you need to put some better processes in place.”

“But Phoebe!!” Calvin could feel himself beginning to hyperventilate. “This is not just about me ... I mean, this will give the PM the perfect excuse to cut the refugee intake. Those crazy people are already blogging about Africans bringing diseases to Australia and the shock jocks...”

“Well Minister, you really ought to have considered that before you did such a rush job on Mombibo’s application,” Phoebe said. “Now listen, while I’ve got you, I need a comment from you for tomorrow’s yarn... Any truth to the rumour that you’re being pressured to resign?”

Over the next twenty minutes, every journalist in Australia rang demanding to know if Calvin would fall on his sword. Not that he was answering the phone—his horrible receptionist had decided to email him his messages as payback for him refusing to answer the phone or open his door. And Calvin couldn't stop himself from checking his computer after each ping. After about fifteen pings, he was so worked up he thought it best to take some time out to practice his yogic breathing and calm down. He was sitting, cross-legged on the floor, a yoga brick between his back and the wall, when the pounding began.

“DELAHUNTY!! YOU IN THERE??”

Suitor, Calvin thought. He drew in a long, slow yogic breath. He let one out.

“OPEN THIS FUCKING DOOR!”

*What matters is not what happens, Calvin mantra-ed to himself; but how you respond—*

“SOMEBODY GET ME THE GOD-DAMN MASTERKEY!” Suitor screamed.

“Ommmmm,” Calvin said.

“CAN YOU HEAR ME DELAHUNTY? OPEN THIS FUCKING DOOR NOW OR I’LL HAVE SECURITY MARCH YOU PAST EVERY TV STATION AS THEY ESCORT YOU OUT OF THE BUILDING.”

Calvin sighed. He stood up and unlocked the door, then sat back down on the floor, put the brick back in place, closed his thumb and forefinger in shavana nidra and shut his eyes. He heard the door slam as Suitor burst through. And then a brief silence.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Suitor asked.

“Hello, Martin,” Calvin said, eyes still closed. “I am meditating.”



“You’re meditating?” Suitor asked.

“Yes. It is a great stress release,” Calvin continued smoothly. There was a silence. Calvin opened his eyes and smiled at Suitor’s red face.

“Are you retarded?” Suitor asked.

Calvin laughed. “Meditating is also a good way to ignore media calls. I am following the theory—one of your favourites, I believe—that to kill something you must starve it of oxygen.”

As Suitor shook his jowls in outrage, Calvin realized he felt remarkably calm. He silently congratulated himself. He had always feared he might be one of those people who went to pieces in a disaster. Obviously not. He felt positively stoic.

“Your resignation will be on the PM’s desk by midday tomorrow,” Suitor spat.

“What?!” Calvin leapt up. “Does the Treasurer know about this?”

Suitor grinned. “If you’re expecting the Treasurer to leap to your defence you might want to think again. You’re about to discover what a fair-weather friend our Mike is. In fact,” Suitor scratched his chin theatrically, “the last *I* heard he was bad mouthing you on Sky News live.”

“Oh,” Calvin said.

“Back to your resignation,” Suitor said. “You have until tomorrow. We’ll run the ‘we’re investigating’ line until then. But just so you know, we’re not investigating—you’re gone—the PM just doesn’t want to look too hasty.”

Calvin felt light-headed and had to lean on the back of the couch to steady himself. He wasn’t so dizzy that he didn’t notice Suitor’s failure to offer Calvin so much as a second to compose himself, let alone a seat or a glass of water.

“If you haven’t announced your resignation by midday, you’ll be frog-marched

out of parliament in disgrace and there will be no chance of a ‘spend-more-time-with-my-family’ press conference.”

Calvin heard a cough and turned to the open door. The receptionist was sitting petrified behind her computer screen: she had witnessed the entire humiliation.

“The children,” Calvin choked, for her sake. “I only did it for the children ... Is that so terrible?”

“Oh, shut the fuck up,” Suitor said and swept out of the office.

Before Calvin could shut his office door, the receptionist had darted through and thrust a fax into his hands.

“It... It looked super-urgent?” she said.

The fax was a single page: a copy of a newspaper article with a short note scrawled across the top: “*Hi Minister, Can I get a comment on this? One hour until deadline. Thanks, Noora.*”

Calvin swallowed. And read.

MINISTER’S DEATH LINKED TO VISA IRREGULARITIES.

Calvin shivered. He sat down, poured himself a large glass of whisky and kept reading.

Police have been asked to investigate links between the death of former Finance Minister Cameron Robb and irregularities in the granting of refugee visas amid revelations the minister was investigating the irregularities when he died last month.

Sources have confirmed that Mr Robb confronted Immigration Minister Calvin Delahunty over the visa scheme just hours before he unexpectedly took his own life.

Mr Robb had been investigating the scheme over concerns that visas were being granted to individuals considered a security risk. These concerns were raised from within Mr Delahunty's own Immigration Department, *The Standard* understands.

While the Immigration Minister has the power to grant visas unilaterally, "Mr Delahunty was not even waiting for the Department's recommendations before he let people go," one source said.

"Nor did Mr Delahunty appear to have a thorough knowledge of the detainees he was releasing," the source said. "There was a view that perhaps he was simply letting them go for good publicity."

*Bloody Judy*, Calvin thought. She didn't even have the decency to put her name to the allegations. Well, if this was her way of saying thanks for that refugee nomination, Calvin would bloody well make sure noone ever nominated her for anything ever again. Calvin took a gulp of whisky and forced himself to finish the article.

The source, who was close to Mr Robb, said the Finance Minister had abruptly called a halt to the investigation into visa irregularities following his visit from Mr Delahunty.

"He said he was being blackmailed," the source said.

Mr Robb was found dead in his parliamentary office last month. At the time there were suggestions that he had taken his own life because he feared details of his private life were about to be published in a major newspaper.

No such details were ever published, but *The Standard's* source said Calvin Delahunty must "come clean. Did he threaten to release details of Mr Robb's private life if Mr Robb did not call off investigations into visa irregularities?"

The same source called on Mr Delahunty to come clean about his relationship with *Sydney Tribune* reporter Phoebe Valor who has written extensively about the Minister's granting of visas. "Ms Valor seems to know more about Mr Delahunty's visa activities than some of his own senior staff."

Calvin downed the rest of his whisky and poured himself another glass. Suitor obviously hadn't seen Noora's article yet. As soon as he did, any chance of Calvin getting a face-saving 'I'm going to spend time with my family' press conference was gone. It was 7pm. The first edition of *The Standard* would be off the press at 4am. He dug his phone out from between the cushions of his Chesterman and began a text message to Phoebe.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Phoebe re-read Calvin's text.

*They know about Robb. They're making me quit. But you're coming with.* The words made just enough sense to turn Phoebe's stomach. She stood up from her desk, walked slowly out of the bureau and down the parliamentary corridor to the bathroom.

Noora was at the basin. She nodded at Phoebe's reflection in the mirror.

"See Larissa's yarn?" she asked.

Phoebe grunted.

"Yeah," Noora said, turning off the taps. "It was a good get." She turned around to face Phoebe. She smiled, and Phoebe saw, for the first time, that Noora had a smile that was just a smile: a nice, kind, slightly rueful, but otherwise completely straightforward smile. Her eyes started to tingle.

"Hey, um, are you OK?" Noora asked.

Phoebe nodded quickly. "I just have to—" she pointed to the cubicle and rushed inside. Phoebe waited for Noora to leave.

In the gap under the cubicle door, Noora's scuffed black shoes shuffled awkwardly. They could have been school shoes. For a brief second Phoebe considered telling Noora the truth. About everything.

"Hey Phoebe?" Noora asked.

Phoebe hmm'd.

"I shouldn't be telling you this ..." Noora's voice trailed off.

"Yes?" Phoebe asked, a shot of adrenaline going through her.

“I’ve got a story in tomorrow’s paper and ...I dunno, I just thought maybe it might help you to know about it in advance...” the school shoes shuffled again.

Phoebe waited.

“I got some leaks from the Immigration Department about this internal investigation ... um into how Delahunty made his visa decisions...”

Phoebe’s stomach dropped. “Oh,” she managed. “Good yarn.”

“Yeah,” Noora said. “I think it is. Also ... there’s some stuff in there about Robb ...”

“Oh?” Phoebe steadied herself against the cubicle walls. “What’s Robb... what’s Robb ... got to do with Delahunty?”

The school shoes tapped quickly. Noora’s voice dropped to a whisper. “I *really* shouldn’t be telling you... Shit! ...It was *Robb* that wanted Delahunty investigated. And apparently he confronted Delahunty about it and then—”

There was a bang and a burst of chatter; they were no longer alone. Noora went quiet.

“Noora?” Phoebe asked finally.

“Yeah, still here,” Noora said. “Listen I’d better go. I just thought I’d let you know ... and, well, I hope you know it’s nothing personal.”

“Personal?” Phoebe asked, abandoning the pretence of calm. “I don’t understand. What do you mean personal? I thought this story was about Calvin—”

“I’m really sorry Phoebe,” Noora said in a low voice, barely audible over the chatter of the interlopers. “I can’t say any more. ... I’ll see you later, OK?”

*Fuck you, Noora*, Phoebe thought. She gulped at the air above her head, trying to catch her breath.

It was quiet in the washroom. Noora had left and the intruders—now in the cubicles on either side of Phoebe’s—must have sensed the presence of drama: their silence was expectant, lascivious even. Phoebe sat quietly on the closed toilet seat, hoping to be forgotten. What exactly did Noora know about Robb? And what could she possibly have that would link him with Phoebe? Phoebe drove her index fingers into her temples and tried to think, but her mind skittered. It wouldn’t stay still. In her right hand, the phone burned with Calvin’s text message. Biting her lip, she clicked open the missive again. Even the electronic letters reminded her of Calvin’s saliva-shiny bucked teeth. She shivered. *You’re coming with.* She could hear him bray the words at her. She shook his face out of her mind. It reappeared. *God!* He wouldn’t even leave her alone inside her own head!

Phoebe had never despised someone like she despised Calvin Delahunty. She despised his boiled face, his wiry hair, his nasal laugh, the entitled way he put his feet up on the coffee table and crossed one over the other, put his hands behind his head. But what she hated most of all was that Calvin Delahunty had created this ... this *person* who was right now crouching in a toilet cubicle, plotting to cover up a ...a ... what did you even *call* what had happened to Robb?

A toilet flushed. Doors banged and the voices started up again; they had given up on discovering whatever drama had unfolded in the ladies’ washroom.

“So do you have to do a correction?” one asked. Phoebe recognized the voice of a junior *Daily Mail* reporter.

“Yes,” groaned the other, another junior Mailer. Water rushed.

“That sucks.” The water stopped. “So what are you going to write?”

“Something ...Like ... Senator Robert Brenner never said he needed sex and a good lie down?”

Phoebe heard giggling.

“Senator Brenner definitely doesn’t need sex.”

More giggling.

“The article should have quoted Senator Brenner saying he needed *Bex* and a good lie down.”

“You mean Rex?” A snort. More giggling. A hand-dryer roared then cut out.

“—Rex the Wonderdog?”

“No, no ...” the voice was fighting laughter. “Bex. It’s like Valium or something. It’s this old thing they used to say.”

The washroom doors swung and the voices faded. Phoebe hugged her knees. If only *she* were worrying about having to write a correction. Or worrying about being scooped by Noora! They were such *innocent* worries. So innocent you’d almost want to be saddled with a couple just so you could appreciate their innocence; just so you could say to yourself ‘sure I made a mistake, but it’s not like I’m a bad person’.

Phoebe was not an idiot. When she allowed herself to consider what she had done she knew that, from an outside point of view, it was bad. But it had not started that way.

Phoebe moaned, pressing her face into her jeans to muffle the sound. She needn’t have bothered: a familiar voice swelled, eclipsing her own.

“You didn’t get it from *me*,” it brayed and Phoebe stared, incredulous, as Calvin Delahunty’s pink, shiny face floated up from under her cubicle door, “but I hear Phoebe



Esther Valor has been a *very* naughty girl!” Calvin threw his ghostly chin back and heehawed through his nose.

Phoebe continued to stare.

“Hello?” the apparition asked. “Earth to Phoebe?”

“Calm down.” Phoebe slapped her cheek. “This isn’t happening.”

“Whatever,” the apparition said. “As I was saying, *you’ve* been a very naughty girl!”

“Fuck you,” Phoebe hissed. “Maybe I have, but at least *I* did it to help someone.”

Calvin’s head chortled. “That’s what *I* said.” It pushed its lips out in a pout, “but I don’t think anybody *be-weived* me.”

Vomit rose in Phoebe’s throat. Calvin was right. No-one would believe she had done this for the kids. Not after Robb. She pleaded with the cubicle door. She *had* started out trying to help. She didn’t even want to write the story on Halani and Mo, but Damien kept pushing and pushing her to get a story, and Tara wouldn’t return her calls, and Matilda was just waiting for her to fail and Sam was just starting to think Phoebe was a good journo and if she didn’t get another story maybe he’d lose interest and then, then, there was her fucking name, Esther, *just like the girl in the bible* her dad had always said, *who was brave and saved her people*. And so she’d finally convinced herself. She told herself that if anyone ever found out what she’d done, she’d admit she felt so sorry for those children she just had to do something. And, if making up a story like that wasn’t exactly *right*, on another level it was completely, justifiably, morally right. No one could condemn her for it. But then ... then something must have happened. She couldn’t actually remember it happening, or couldn’t remember an exact moment at which it had happened. But somehow, she had gone from Halani and Mo to ... to Robb. Somewhere along the line everything had gone from good to really, really bad. Maybe she had panicked and just

tried to keep it all going a little longer. Or tried to stop everyone finding out what she'd done. If everything hadn't happened so quickly, if she'd had time to stop and think it all through...

"Oh so *that's* all it was," the apparition sneered. "A good deed gone wrong! I'm so glad we cleared that up. I was starting to think you were just a power hungry bitch ... or a narcissist like me!"

Right again, thought Phoebe. She liked being a star journalist. And she liked controlling things, directing the scenes. Correction: she liked being *behind* the scenes. The invisibility had intoxicated her. She could *do* things, important things, and if they went wrong she could say: what's it got to do with me? She could act without acting; she could make decisions without consequence. Her name was not attached to the chaos she caused. *Until now*, she thought. Phoebe felt her bowels turn to water. Calvin's face dissolved and suddenly she was watching Sam, Noora, Larissa and Tom. They were in a pub.

"She probably has low self-esteem," Phoebe imagined Larissa saying—but doubtfully, to make herself look kind for giving Phoebe the benefit of the doubt.

Phoebe saw Tom laugh and shake his head. "I just can't believe she had it in her."

Sam's mouth twisted into a grin, the same grin he'd used to flirt with Phoebe.

"I know!" he laughed. "She seemed so *good*!"

And then this imaginary Sam whom, Phoebe feared, was not so different from the real one, put on a pantomime: a little Phoebe caricature that tossed her hair and batted her eyelashes and raised her fist in the air, ridiculously, like Ruth Lopes. Larissa and Tom snorted beer out their noses.

Imaginary Noora, who had been watching all of this quietly—Noora, who had been the one to undo Phoebe, but seemed to be taking no pleasure in the fact—turned to Sam and said, almost accusingly: “I thought you and Phoebe had a thing together?”

And even though Noora was not trying to be funny, imaginary Sam laughed so much he sprayed his imaginary beer all over the table.

The shame winded her. Phoebe knew she should just let the whole thing be done with. She knew she should just quit her job, let Noora’s story come out, let Calvin say what he was going to. Deal with it.

But she just *couldn’t*. She couldn’t be that pathetic person that her actions would make her out to be. Maybe if she thought she’d have a chance to explain how it had all started, how Robb had been an accident, how she assumed she’d just show Calvin how easy it was to let people go and how it would make him more popular not less, but how he’d hounded her and hounded her until she’d written the story about Mombibo ... if she knew she’d have a chance to explain all that ... but she knew she wouldn’t ... and so she was stuck.

“I’m baaaaack,” Calvin re-materialized in front of the cubicle door.

“Would you fuck *off*?” Phoebe hissed.

The face grinned.

“What?” raged Phoebe. “You’re fucking *haunting* me now? You’re fucking Banquo’s Ghost now? You’re not even *dead*.”

“Banjo Who?” the apparition honked. “What *are* you going on about?”

But Phoebe’s mind was already somewhere else. She stared right through Calvin at the cubicle door; a terrible idea was coming to her. She’d created him hadn’t she? So couldn’t she destroy him too? After all, she owned the copyright.

Phoebe waited until just before 1am, the deadline for the last edition, before she went to Calvin's parliamentary rooms. The reception was dark; the only light seeping out from under the office door. Phoebe knocked.

There was a pause. And then: "Come in." Phoebe could hear alcohol in the voice. *Good*, she thought. She pushed the door.

Calvin was lying flat on his back on one of the vomit-green leather couches, a silk eye-pillow over his face, a bottle of whisky and a half-empty glass on the table beside him.

"It's me," she said, when he didn't look up. She took a seat on the opposite couch.

"How'd you know I'd be here?" Calvin asked from under his eye-pillow.

"There's media at every entrance to Parliament," Phoebe said.

"They want me to resign," Calvin said.

"Yes," said Phoebe.

"The PM has given me until tomorrow," Calvin said, "and then he'll fire me."

"Right," said Phoebe.

"Have you seen Noora's story?" Calvin asked, and Phoebe thought he sounded unnaturally calm, unemotional, like he was just about to crack.

"Judy's fingerprints are all over it," Calvin went on. "She's obviously forgotten how grateful she was for that nomination I gave her. I should have pulled some strings to get her the job, then she wouldn't be stabbing me in the back now." Calvin took off his eye pillow. He turned his face to Phoebe's. "I suppose you know they know I visited Robb just before he ...?"

Phoebe nodded.

“It seems Robb called Judy just after I left, said he couldn’t go through with the investigation because *I’d* threatened to expose him—”

“Right,” Phoebe said.

“You don’t seem very worried,” Calvin said, looking again at Phoebe. He closed his eyes. “Perhaps you don’t understand the gravity of your situation.”

“Oh I think I do—” Phoebe began.

“Which I suppose is understandable given there’s no mention of you doing anything specifically *wrong* in Noora’s article,” Calvin sighed. “The problem is those questions she raised about our relationship,” he paused. “I have to fill up a whole press conference—or at least a press *release*—and I can’t really think of what to say ... except that maybe I was lead astray by a certain ambitious journalist, blackmailed even—”

“I never blackmailed you—” Phoebe said.

Calvin sighed again. “Implicitly, yes, but still ... I *was* awfully worried that you’d tell everyone about the statue and I would have been so embarrassed—”

“Here,” Phoebe said, thrusting a piece of paper at Calvin.

“What’s this?” he said wearily, drawing the paper to his face.

Phoebe waited.

It was as though he’d been hit with a heart-starter. Calvin sat bolt upright, exhaling a gust of air like a curse. Then he turned slowly to face Phoebe, the piece of paper she’d given him crushed in his fist. He laughed without his eyes and Phoebe was surprised to find herself feeling scared.

“Just read the whole thing,” she said, as calmly as she could.

Calvin held Phoebe’s eyes as he unclenched his fist and flattened out the piece of paper. He gulped at the glass of whisky and began to read.

Phoebe watched closely as Calvin's eyes skittered to and fro across the page. She watched as his shoulders dropped, as his eyes softened out of their angry slits, misted, and then filled with tears. Now and then, he shook his head slightly as if laughing at the antics of a silly but adorable child, or in wonder at some heroic deed. As she watched him Phoebe prayed without articulating, even in the privacy of her own mind, what horror it was she was praying for, not letting herself consider to whom or to what she would dare offer such a prayer.

"Have you filed this?" Calvin asked finally, his face still wet with tears.

"Not yet," Phoebe said. She glanced at her watch. "There's still fifteen minutes before the Metro edition goes."

Calvin laughed. "So it's up to me?"

"Yes," said Phoebe. "You or your reputation."

"Yes," Calvin said, sipping his whisky. "Funny how they got separated."

"Mm," said Phoebe.

Calvin looked down into the glass-topped coffee table, and Phoebe watched him study his own reflection. Some minutes passed.

Eventually Calvin looked up. "You do have a way with words," he said. He flapped the piece of paper in his hand and stifled a sob. "I really was a rather wonderful man, wasn't I?"

Phoebe smiled. "Positively saintly," she said. It had worked. She wouldn't even need to file her story: Calvin would create the news himself.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Phoebe had offered him drugs for an overdose, but he'd turned her down. An overdose would send the wrong message: too effeminate. He needed something with a bit more oomph. Still, now that the deed was getting closer, Calvin wondered whether Phoebe's drugs might have been better—less painful—after all.

She had obviously thought it out so carefully. *His death*. Calvin shivered the thought from his mind. There was no point thinking too much about it now. He would have to die eventually. And at least this way he'd never get old and ugly, plus he'd still draw a good crowd at the funeral. Calvin felt rather impressed with his own courage. He gave himself a sympathetic punch in the arm and took a swig of his whisky.

He did wish he'd provided Amelia with some instructions. She'd want to hire out one of the big cathedrals, for example, so everyone would fit. And where to hold it? Canberra? Sydney? Melbourne? Calvin supposed it wouldn't matter too much; people would travel for the funeral of a senior minister. He *had* always liked the gothic drama of St Mary's and it had great, drop-down projection screens, so they could show photos of him at either end of the service. As long as Amelia didn't kybosh the photo thing: she had funny ideas about keeping certain things “out of the public eye” or “in the family”, whatever that meant. Calvin told himself not to worry. Alastair and the chaps would talk her out of any such nonsense. He wondered which photos she'd choose, and which she'd release to the papers? He should probably have censored the family albums: there were a few too many photos of him with a double chin and flabby midriff. It wouldn't have worried him ordinarily of course, but these were the images by which he would be *remembered*. Calvin choked on his whisky. His chest suddenly felt very tight. *Breathe Calvin,*

he thought. *In-two-three, out-two-three, in-two-three*. After a few minutes, feeling calmer, he rolled his shoulders back, drained the rest of his whisky and poured himself another glass.

Maintaining his yogic breathing, Calvin unfurled the fingers of his left hand and looked at the pink Ferragamo tie spilling out over his palm. It was his favourite tie; how strange that he'd decided to wear it today. Calvin's chest tightened again. It was no use. He wasn't ready. He clamped his fingers over the tie.

Trying to distract himself, Calvin turned his mind to the eulogy. Ironically enough, imagining his own eulogy had been one of his favourite methods of getting off to sleep (that, or imagining himself tearfully but heroically giving the eulogy of an even more famous friend). But now that the reality was imminent, the pleasant visions of grief-struck loved ones were somewhat crowded out by logistics. For example, Amelia wasn't up-to-date with who Calvin spent time with these days. He hoped she wouldn't ask any of his backbench chums. They *could* be a bit crass and Calvin didn't want his eulogy turning into a 21<sup>st</sup> speech. He wondered whether the Treasurer would do it. Yes, he'd hung Calvin out to dry following the HIV debacle, but he hadn't done it *too* publicly and Calvin could certainly forgive the lack of loyalty in return for a glowing eulogy. Though, it occurred to Calvin, as he pictured the Treasurer's jaw opening and closing in its customary monosyllabic fashion, Mike didn't really *do* glowing. Then again, what were media teams for? Still, Calvin wondered whether he'd better not leave them some notes ... make sure they got all the important points?

That topic depleted, Calvin tried to muster the courage to look at his watch. He loved that watch. It was a George Jensen, a gift from his mother and sister, Prudence, to mark his first day in Parliament. Sixteen years ago next month. Calvin shook his head. It had gone by in a flash. Still, he had done well with himself. Only nine other Australians



had ever become senior ministers before the age of 40. Calvin wondered what else he might have achieved had his life not been so tragically cut short.

Finally, like an accident victim viewing their horrific injuries for the first time, Calvin forced himself to focus on the little silver hands of his beautiful George Jensen. 2.20am. Phoebe's story would hit the wires in less than two hours.

"Calvin!" he whispered to himself sternly. "Enough procrastinating! This is it old chap!" His stoicism moved him to tears. Sobbing he drained the last of his whisky and walked to the en suite.

He looked at himself in the vanity mirror. Not too bad. There were the under-eye bags, but, on the up side, they did speak to his tireless dedication. Calvin carefully removed any evidence of tears with a damp flannel; he had to look presentable. But as soon as he'd finished washing his face, he began to weep again.

"Calvin!" he admonished his reflection. "Be strong!" He didn't want to be found with snot all over his face! Eventually, he managed to pull himself together sufficiently enough to shave, deal with a few stray nasal hairs and change his underwear. His appearance checked he inserted his favourite CD into the player and settled back into the couch for one more whisky.

He decided he would just write a very brief email to his mother and Amelia and Prudence; they should be the first to know about his passing. But he would not write a general note. Phoebe's story described him perfectly and he didn't want anything to distract from it. Calvin had to hand it to her: whatever her faults, Phoebe Valor was a great writer. She, and she alone, had captured Calvin's essence, his motivations, what drove him. Sure, some of the things she had written were not strictly true at the time of writing, but—and this was the remarkable thing—in a sense they were more true than

some of the things Calvin had done in real life. Phoebe had managed to see him as he really was, as he acted and behaved in his own head—from the inside, as it were—and to write *that*. And what she wrote became reality; her stories wrote Calvin's destiny and changed his past. Whether it was the version of Calvin in Phoebe's articles that had come first—or the one in Calvin's head—was besides the point: what had resulted was the ideal Calvin. The true Calvin. Before Phoebe Valor had happened to him, many people could very easily have drawn the wrong conclusions about just what type of man Calvin Delahunty was. Thankfully, for all that she was a cold-hearted bitch, Phoebe had changed that.

Take the obituary she had written. It started out ordinarily enough, listing Calvin's achievements—his stellar ascent into politics at a young age, electoral success yada yada—impressive, sure, but nothing *super* special. But then the anecdotes: Calvin risking the PM's wrath to let a child go, stubbornly telling his staff he would not be cowed by what might happen to him; Calvin playing soccer with young Sudanese boys, slipping money to their guardians for after-school coaching; Calvin lying in front of a bus to stop it ferrying asylum-seekers to be deported; Calvin admonishing students for giving him a hero's reception, after all, he was only doing his job (he couldn't quite remember all of these events, but his life had become so hectic towards the end, it was hardly surprising!). Yes. Calvin Delahunty had been a humble, brave, humanitarian man. His death would be a massive loss to politics. To Australia, even. Calvin wondered whether someone might nominate him for Australian of the Year. Did they even have a posthumous Award?

“SIR! Can you hear me, sir?”

The gruff voice came down at him through some kind of tunnel. It was very echoey.

“Sir?” the voice came again. “I want you to nod your head if you can hear me.”

Calvin tried to nod; his head hurt terribly.

“Maybe you should slap him.” This one was a female voice.

Calvin tried again to nod.

“OK, that’s good,” said the gruff voice. “That’s very good, Sir.”

Calvin squinted open his eyes to a circle of bright light, on the outskirts of which floated some very unkempt eyebrows.

“M’I in heaven?” Calvin slurred.

“No, sir,” said the female voice. “You’re in Canberra.”

No one was more surprised than Calvin when he woke from his coma. Well, it wasn’t a coma as *such*, more like “a very, very deep sleep”, according to the doctors (though as far as Calvin understood it, these things were on a bit of a spectrum—one person’s deep sleep equals another’s coma yada, yada—and everyone knew how anal doctors could be!). Anyway, the good news was, he was awake! Calvin’s mother had always *said* he had the constitution of an ox.

Calvin floated pleasantly on the after-effects of the painkillers and the cloudlike whiteness of the hospital room, as a doctor and nurse spoke in hushed tones at the foot of the bed. Whether the whispering was due to respect for Calvin’s fragile state or they were just awed at having a government minister in their care, was not immediately apparent. Either way, Calvin was not worried. Lazily, he tried to piece together what had happened the night before. It was such a blur! He remembered being on the couch and then ...

*What?* ... He floated a bit more and then it began to come back. He nodded to himself as the scene returned.

*Oh Fortuna* had started playing. It had been such a long time since he'd heard the real version—as opposed to the tinny ringtone replica. Those timpani drums! That chorus! So dramatic! So ... apocalyptic. He had been standing on his desk, ready, but then suddenly the thought of dying—and the agony along the way—had been too much. Not that Calvin was worried for *himself*. It was the thought of the look on his poor mother's face that undid him. Calvin was her whole *life*! And then he had thought of how his sister, Prudence, would take the news. They had always had such fun together. Thick as thieves, those two! And Amelia! Poor, poor Amelia! She would be devastated. No doubt she would never recover; certainly she'd never remarry. Constance and Casper would be fatherless.

And then Calvin had thought of the refugees. That is, the non-refugees. The people who weren't allowed to be refugees ...the ... the *what* did you call them? The *asylum-seekers*. Anyway, the correct description was not the point. The point was, there was no way whoever replaced him as Minister would be so compassionate. And so, Calvin had thought, how could he leave the poor non-refugees to such an uncertain fate? It was unconscionable. He had put his foot down. Death would not take Calvin Delahunty that night. And then he'd jumped off the desk.

That was the last thing he remembered. But it was obvious now that he must already have had the tie around his neck when he jumped. He *had* been rather sloshed. Calvin tittered. Then shuddered. It could have turned out very differently. But his fall and everything must have made quite a racket; the security guard on duty had called the ambulance and they were all on the scene within minutes, thank God.

Back in Canberra Hospital, the doctor's mouth was opening and closing, fish-like. It took Calvin a moment to realize the doctor was addressing *him*, which just proved, Calvin thought to himself, how out of it he'd been, coma or no coma.

"You should be able to go home this afternoon," the doctor said.

"This afternoon?" Calvin sat up. "As in, a few hours from now? Really? You don't think there's been some mistake? I mean, I *almost died*—"

"You didn't almost die," the doctor said. "You were concussed. When you hit the coffee table. Didn't the nurse tell you all this?"

"Yes, yes," Calvin waved his hand. "But surely the end *result* is the same, isn't it? The thing is, are you sure I'll be OK so soon after such an ... ordeal?" Calvin thought the doctor looked very, very young. Perhaps he was a trainee. Calvin strained to read the nametag: Dr. Kong.

"And by ordeal you would be referring to the —?" Dr. Kong asked. "The concussion?" He didn't wait for Calvin to reply. "Either way, I think you will be OK."

Calvin didn't want to go home. Not yet. He felt so lovely and floaty. And safe. And people would feel sorry for him while he was still in hospital. They couldn't get angry at him over the whole refugee debacle. He suddenly remembered Noora's story. Oh *God!* Was that being published today? Or tomorrow? Last night's panic rose up in him again, gripping him tight through the throat and chest.

"The thing is," Calvin dropped his head. "I'm feeling very," he made his voice break. "I'm not sure I wouldn't try ... you know ... to hurt myself again—"

Dr. Kong stared at him. "You're suicidal?" he asked.

Which university produced this wonderful bedside manner? Calvin wondered. He

nodded. “Yes mm.”

“Fine,” Dr. Kong said. “I’ll get the resident psych to come and assess you. Make sure you’re OK to send home.”

“Oh good!” Calvin clapped his hands. “*That’s* a relief! Listen, while you’re here, I do have rather a headache. I don’t suppose I could get some pain relief? Obviously,” he chortled, “nothing OD-able!”

Dr. Kong didn’t even crack a smile. “I can have the nurse bring you some happy gas,” he said.

“Great!” Calvin wondered how someone so young could be so grumpy.

Dr. Kong cleared his throat. “There is another matter.”

Calvin covered his mouth with his hand. “You’re not going to tell me there’s some lasting damage, are you?” he said. “Please say you’re not.”

“No. I’m not,” Dr. Kong said.

“Oh thank God for that!” Calvin let out a breath.

“Though you will be severely constipated from the pain medication.” Dr. Kong coughed. “The real problem is that the television news is saying you’re dead.”

Calvin felt as though he had been winded. *Phoebe’s story*. It had gone to print. He felt cold. *God!* What would he do *now*? And there was Noora’s story too. What a mess! Suitor would be livid—

“Mr Delahunty!” Dr. Kong snapped. “Please concentrate! I have other patients I need to see.”

“Yes,” Calvin said, still in shock. “Sorry.”

Dr. Kong cleared his throat again. “I would suggest the hospital’s PR department contact the television stations to tell them of your,” he paused, “happy recovery.” He

paused again “Would that be acceptable to you?”

Calvin assented. Then he asked for the gas.

The horrible Dr. Kong gone, Calvin flicked through the channels on his ceiling-mounted television until he found Sky. He assumed the hospital had called Sky first; everyone knew it was best with breaking news. Then again, maybe it would have been better to hold off and try to get it announced on Sunrise? A less newsy format did allow for a more sympathetic treatment of a subject.

Calvin didn’t have to wait more than seven minutes, before Roy Blewitt, Sky’s *Morning News* anchor, was pressing his microphone into his ear and shushing his panel.

Calvin took a long drag of his laughing gas and giggled with dread.

“Hang on a minute, Tiffany,” Roy said to camera, “I’m getting a report through.” He held up a finger. “Yes... uh-huh ...how solid is this information, Christine?” He nodded authoritatively. “Right, right.” Though he looked like he was concentrating very hard, Roy managed to simultaneously communicate to his television audience—through a series of impressive eyebrow maneuvers—that something incredible was happening. After a few moments, he took the finger from his ear and shook his head in disbelief. “Remarkable news, ladies and gentlemen,” he said. And then he paused.

“Oh for pity’s *sake*, get on with it!” Calvin hissed at the TV, taking another hit of gas.

“It seems,” Roy paused, “that the Minister for Immigration, Calvin Delahunty,” Roy paused, “whom, may I remind you, was reportedly found dead in his office this very morning,” he paused again, “well, it seems Calvin Delahunty is *not* dead.” Off camera, someone swore very loudly. Roy did not flinch.

“That’s right,” he continued. “You heard correctly. And you heard it first here. Sky News has it from credible sources that Calvin Delahunty is in Canberra Hospital, where he is in a critical, but stable condition.”

Calvin giggled as he sucked back the gas. Bloody journos, always making everything sound like it came from deep throat himself. Of course it was a credible source, it was the hospital’s bloody PR department! And then it struck him that the TVs would be sending their cameras down to the hospital. Calvin hit the nurse’s buzzer. The cameras had to be kept out! There were no drips or tubes coming out of him; he didn’t even have a heart monitor. The public would never believe how close he had come to the brink if they didn’t see tubes.

Back on the television, Roy Blewitt was in his element.

“If you’ve just joined us, it’s been a morning of high drama,” he said. “The Minister for Immigration, Calvin Delahunty, found dead. This morning. And then, this: and some would call it a miracle: a report that the Minister had survived. It sounded too good to be true and yet it was. There was confirmation. Calvin Delahunty is alive and—if not yet out of the woods—certainly on the way to recovery.” The camera panned out and Calvin watched as the panelists—two senior journos who had just moments ago been discussing his death—embraced. One wiped away tears.

“Emotional scenes here—” Roy intoned as a bright cloud caught Calvin’s attention. A massive bouquet of birds of paradise and banksias was walking into the room.

“Calvin Bellyhunty?” the bouquet asked.

“Yes,” Calvin said.

“Is for you,” the bouquet replied, before separating itself from a short, hairy man



and settling on the windowsill.

“Is more coming,” the bouquet said again. Calvin blinked hard.

“I *said*, is more coming.”

It suddenly dawned on Calvin that the voice didn’t belong to the bouquet at all but to the little man with all hair. He carefully returned the gas mask to its canister.

Flowers already! Calvin couldn’t believe how quickly word had got around. Though, to be fair, most of Canberra had probably been glued to their television screens since hearing the news of his death. It *was* past 6am. Political types would have been up for at least an hour. Thank God he’d told the hospital to keep everyone out. Calvin flicked across the other TV channels. “CALVIN DELAHUNTY TO SURVIVE” screamed one news ticker. “REFUGEE: GOD SAVED DELAHUNTY” bellowed another. Calvin let out a huge sigh and cracked his neck. Everything was going to be OK. He slipped out of bed and searched the birds of paradise for a card.

*Naughty Calvin, scaring us like that!!!!*” read the tag, on which someone had drawn a duck with a bandaged bill. “*Get better SOONEST!!! Love, Ruth (Lopes) xxx.*”

Calvin grinned. Jolly old Ruth!

When he woke again, Calvin was still in Canberra Hospital and there was an almighty clattering coming from the foot of his bed. He winched himself up to see a large nurse wrestling with his file. With some effort, she ripped it off the hook. She pushed her glasses to the top of her head, grunted and began making notes.

Calvin coughed. She looked up.

“Oh hello, darlin’,” she wheezed. “I didn’t wake you, did I?”

Calvin didn't reply. He looked at his watch. 11am! How had he fallen asleep? And what had been happening outside? He hadn't checked his messages since ... since he'd come to!

"You know," Calvin said, "you should probably warn people about that happy gas."

"Uh-huh," the nurse said, still scribbling in his file.

"Have you seen my phone?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Looked in your jacket?"

Calvin tried to hide his irritation as he heaved himself out of bed and across to the room's only chair, over the back of which someone had carelessly tossed his *Armani* blazer. He searched the breast pocket and sighed as he felt the phone's outline. Its very shape was comforting. He pulled it out. Twenty-six messages! Calvin wasn't sure whether he should be gratified or nervous. He told himself he had nothing to be nervous about, the messages were certainly from well-wishers.

"Mr Delahunty??" the nurse's jowly face was suddenly right next to his. Calvin tried not to react to her sour breath. What *happens* to nurses, he wondered. They start out so nubile and accommodating and end up ... like *this*.

"I said the doctor will be around to sign your discharge papers in the next hour or so," she wheezed.

"But I haven't seen the psychiatrist yet," Calvin protested. "The doctor said I couldn't leave until I'd been assessed by the psych."

"Well, darlin'," the nurse said, "if it makes you feel any better, I'm a psych *nurse*. And you look OK to me."

Calvin stared. Was she joking?

“Still,” he said, trying to keep calm. “I *would* like to see a psychiatrist before I am sent home. And, really, I would have thought it was in the hospital’s best interests too ... to make sure a patient is not sent home prematurely. Imagine how terrible it would look if something happened after a person had been discharged without the proper checks.”

“Oh well,” the nurse drawled. “I think I’ll take my chances. We need the bed.”

“Right,” Calvin said. “That *is* disappointing. And just to forewarn you, I *will* be making a formal complaint at a later date.”

“Well, there you go then!” the nurse beamed. “You *will* be alright after all. That’s good news, isn’t it?”

Calvin chose to ignore the provocation. “The media will, of course, need some notice,” he said. “When can your PR office announce it?”

“Announce what darlin’?” the nurse leant on the end of Calvin’s bed, causing the whole thing to list.

“My discharge,” Calvin said.

The nurse’s jaw went slack. “We don’t normally announce it when a patient goes home.”

“Yes, well,” Calvin smiled patiently. “This is hardly a *normal* situation is it?”

The nurse looked confused.

“I mean it’s not every day that Government Ministers are in Canberra Hospital, is it?” Calvin asked.

The nurse mumbled something about a psych and bustled back out of the room.

Calvin gazed over at his windowsill to count the vases of flowers. Eleven. Your average patient didn’t get eleven vases of flowers over two days, let alone six hours! In fact, Calvin

remembered visiting the PM in hospital and there couldn't have been more than five bouquets in the room that day. Much as Calvin hated to focus on himself, there was no denying it: the people had taken him into their hearts. His eyes dampened. It was so humbling! He really *had* given everyone a scare, just like Ruth Lopes said. Of course, he was truly sorry for that. He hadn't meant to hurt anyone. He was just so ashamed of what had happened with that HIV case and then there were all those questions about the refugees and then ... well *then*, Phoebe had offered him such an easy way out: she had given him the chance to be remembered as a great man, to dodge all the difficult questions, to escape the horrible feeding frenzy that could occur when the press got hold of a reputation. Plus, of *course*, as Phoebe's obituary had said, he'd been so worried about how his actions might affect the "reffos" that he'd thought (mistakenly, of course), that it would be better for them with him out of the way. Calvin bit off a scraggy bit of fingernail. He hoped no one would be upset with him for saying "reffos". He had used it in an endearing manner, of course, like how someone who has proved they are not prejudiced can call gay people fags or chubby people fatso. Would people get that that's what he was doing? He wished, actually, that Phoebe had *not* used that word. Still, he could deny saying it. After all, she had also reported he was dead, which he patently wasn't, so what else had she gotten wrong?

Calvin sighed. It would be nice to be able to brainstorm all this with someone. And to get a little help with the publicity for his discharge; hospital PR was obviously useless. Calvin focused on a large bunch of pink and red gerberas: his favourite flowers. From Tara. He bit his fingernail again. Would she come back to him? She obviously still cared. Calvin shook his head at his own silliness. Of course she would come back! Calvin would convince her.

Tara answered her phone after less than a ring.

“Hi Ta-ra,” Calvin said. He smiled. “Yes. It’s *really* me ... Oh Tara! don’t cry ... yes, yes, I *understand*. I did give you a fright, didn’t I? It *was* very silly of me ... but you know how passionate I can be ... Yes! ... I can’t *imagine* what you must have thought when you heard I was dead! ... So, what *did* you think? ... Oh you didn’t hear that part? What about Phoebe’s story?... What do you *mean* there wasn’t one?”

Calvin was awfully confused. What had happened to Phoebe’s story? It must have run. Otherwise, how on earth had everyone known he was dead? Then something clicked in his brain. Of course! The *email*! Amelia or Prudence must have seen it and it *had* been rather definite *by the time you read this I will be long gone* ... Pruey would have been too grief stricken to go to the press, but perhaps Amelia had called them. Yes, it must have been Amelia though Calvin was a little surprised at her hunger for the spotlight; she might at least have waited until he was *declared* dead. He and Amelia might need to have a little talk... He remembered Phoebe’s story.

“So, you have actually seen the *Trib* today?” he asked Tara.

“All three editions, really? And nothing?” Calvin suppressed a shudder. Phoebe had never even intended to file that story. It had been a trick. And he had almost kill—had almost ended it all.

“What?” Calvin remembered where he was. “Oh so *that* was the first you heard of it? Oh ... well thank goodness for *that* ... Still, I suppose there were quite a lot of poor people who thought they’d had their last conversation with Calvin Delahunty!” Calvin chuckled. He cleared his throat.

“Now, Tara. As you can imagine ... the attention has been overwhelming ... Yes! And I dare say it’s likely to get worse before it gets better ... oh, no, no, I don’t mean worse as in *bad* I mean worse as in, a lot more of it ... Yes, yes ... Anyhoo, I’m looking for someone to handle my media ... you would? Really? Good! I’d need you to start immediately of course. Good. When can you get here? Because they want me out this afternoon. ... Yes. Yes, it *is* premature. But, you know, they need the bed and I *offered* ... yes. Yes ... anyway I thought it might be a good media opportunity ...”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Phoebe didn't care if she was scooped. She burrowed into her bed as though the twisted, sweaty sheets could swallow her up. Her stomach cramped. She tossed from one side to the other, trying to escape the pain. Trying to escape her conscience.

She heard the whirr of a helicopter circling overhead. The sirens had fallen silent over an hour ago; this chopper was a bird of prey; it belonged to one of the TV stations. Phoebe imagined the live-to-air footage: a blue polyurethane bag strapped tight to a metal gurney, yellow police tape, a waiting ambulance, a shivering reporter with perfect hair and a big fluffy microphone, salivating at the unfolding drama. Phoebe's stomach cramped again and a cold nausea washed over her. She buried her face in her pillow and screamed. What had she done? What had she *done*? She screamed into the pillow again. The exertion was the only thing that stopped the terror in her chest from consuming her.

She hadn't meant for Calvin to die, she told herself. She had only wanted him gone. *Gone*. Not dead. She had just wanted to make everything stop. To make sure Sam and her mum and dad and Larissa and Tom and Hen and Matilda, but mostly just Sam, never found out what she had done. Phoebe whimpered, remembering the night before. She had felt so calm, so detached—like she imagined a psychopath would feel. But *she* couldn't be a psychopath, could she? She was so normal. She read trashy magazines and liked bubble baths and had a crush on Sam ... that wasn't what evil was like. Evil didn't have a *conscience*. Evil didn't get scared about getting in trouble from its news editor. Evil didn't care about what happened to some kids in a detention centre. Did it?

Her calmness now seemed to Phoebe like a symptom of her depravity. But last night she'd seen it as a sign that she was doing the right thing. Calvin wouldn't want to

live as a pariah, she had told herself; she was just offering him a way out of his predicament. Had she forced him to take that way out? No. All she'd done was give him a slip of paper! The decision had been *his*.

Her mobile buzzed and skittered across the bedside table like a taunt. Damien. She pressed the ignore button. Let him think she was in the shower. It was 7.30am. A strange time for reality to bend upon itself, Phoebe thought. She had always imagined apocalypses to happen at night. Not, so to speak, in the cold light of morning. But maybe that was the joke. You think you're safe in the morning, so that's when the shit hits the fan. You think you're helping people, so that's when you turn into a killer, or a euthaniser, or whatever it was she'd had become.

The phone tittered.

Please stop, Phoebe wailed. Damien's apoplexy didn't matter to her anymore. She was finished with journalism. He could find some other hack to take his calls at 6am and 5am and 11.30 pm. Phoebe sobbed. How had she got to this point? She didn't even *like* her job. And now it had ruined her life.

The phone tittered again. OK, fine. Fine, FINE. SHE had ruined her life. Not the fucking job. Not Damien. Not Calvin. HER. Fine. She got it. Phoebe Esther Valor. With the stupid fucking name that sounded like she was meant to be some great saviour and help people. That was the great cosmic gag. Phoebe Esther Valor, with the biblical name turns out to be a killer. Ha ha. You caught us all off guard. Kudos. Big respect. Whatever.

Something beeped. Phoebe froze, trying not to breathe. It beeped again. The landline, Phoebe realised. The world tipped and she was back in her room, in her bed, twisted in the sheets. She should pick up, she thought, if she didn't want to raise any suspicions. But what suspicions could she raise anyway? The man had taken his own life.



What the hell did she have to do with it? But the thought of having to write a story about it, or of having to hand in the one she had already written—last night—was sickening. It would be the last step off a cliff she could never climb back up.

The phone rang again then clicked to the answering machine. Phoebe heard her own voice explaining she was out, asking whoever was calling to leave a message. She had always thought she had a nasal voice, but now she marvelled at how clear and untroubled it sounded. It was the voice of a young, fairly successful, not bad-looking, not totally maladjusted woman: the voice of another person.

“Phoebe, where are you?” Damien’s voice was like a surround sound system installed in her head.

“I need to talk to you ASAP. Delahunty’s in Canberra Hospital. Should be released in a few hours. Need you down there NOW. Call me back in ... like, less than five minutes ... or I’ll send Matilda down instead.”

Damien hung up. Phoebe realised she was standing next to her bed, chewing on the corner of her sheet. She was holding her breath. Calvin was being released? Was he alive? The way Damien had spoken it sounded like he was alive...Phoebe pushed the thought away. She was being delusional, trying to make herself feel better. She had heard him wrong. Or Damien had got it wrong. She shook her head free of the wishful thinking. But it returned, tentatively, like a shy child raising his hand in a classroom full of bullies. Damien had to be looking at the newswires, she told herself. The *wires* wouldn’t get it wrong. And if they did, they’d correct it within a minute or two. Damien had been calling her for at least 20 minutes.

Phoebe hit Damien's number. As the phone dialled and rang, she bargained for Calvin Delahunty's life. She would give up journalism. She would go to church. She would never lie again. She would admit to making up stories—

"Where the *fuck* have you been?" Damien barked.

"Sorry, I was in the shower—"

"Haven't you heard?"

Phoebe didn't trust herself to speak.

"Delahunty's in hospital."

"Oh—" Phoebe sucked in air.

"Yeah. Bloody idiot," Damien said.

"So he's ...OK, alive?" Phoebe whispered.

"Yes. Course he's fucking alive—"

"Oh thank God!" Phoebe clapped a hand over her mouth to try and stifle a sob.

"Phoebe?" Damien asked. He sounded worried. "Are you OK?"

Phoebe couldn't answer.

"I'm sorry," Damien said. "I didn't realise you and the minister were so ... close... I didn't mean to sound ...um, unsympathetic or anything."

Phoebe held her hand over the mouthpiece as she sobbed.

"Phoebe?" Damien asked again, sounding as soft as it was possible for Damien to sound. "Do you want me to send Matilda to the hospital?"

Phoebe swallowed her sobs. "No," she said. "No. Sorry Damo. I just got a bit of a shock, that's all. I'm fine. I'll go."

The street leading up to the front entrance of the Canberra Hospital had been blocked off and the policeman manning the plastic barricade waved the taxi to a stop.

“Emergency vehicles only past this point,” he said through the window. “You’ll have to let the fare out here.” He turned to Phoebe. “You a journalist?” The question was an accusation.

Phoebe nodded, handed a cab-charge ticket to the driver and scrambled out the door. “Has he come out yet?” she asked.

“Has who come out yet?” the officer said, smirking.

Oh very funny, Phoebe thought.

“Thanks!” she yelled over her shoulder as she ran towards the crowd that had gathered in front of the hospital entrance. At the centre of the group, a small thin man in a white coat was holding court. Spotting Noora, Phoebe pushed her way through.

“Why are you discharging him so early?” a voice called from somewhere to Phoebe’s right.

“I would not say we *are* discharging him early,” the man in the white coat said.

“But he’s tried to top himself, right?” the voice called again. “And you’re letting him go—”

“I don’t know where you received that information from,” White Coat said. “But we have not released any information about why Mr Delahunty was admitted. What I am here to tell you is simply that he will be discharged just after midday, so if you could vacate the area until—”

Realising it wouldn’t be getting anything out of White Coat, the media throng promptly dismissed him in favour of mobile phones, cigarettes, shouted greetings. Noora

was scribbling in her notebook.

“Hi,” Phoebe said, touching her elbow.

“Phoebe!” Noora looked surprised. “Hi.”

“I haven’t had a chance to check out your story yet—”

“They killed it after the first edition,” Noora said.

“Oh. Sorry to hear that. Well, not for me obviously—” Phoebe tried to smile.

“Doesn’t matter,” Noora said. “They’re not going to run something critical of a guy who’s just tried to kill himself.” She paused, waved her hand at the hospital. “Which is probably the point of all this.”

“So you don’t think he meant to—”

“Kill himself?” Noora snorted. “He tried to hang himself from an indoor *plant*.”

“You’re kidding?” Phoebe said.

Noora nodded. “The trunk broke.”

Phoebe couldn’t help herself. The corners of her mouth twitched. She bit her lip. Chewed at its insides. Tried to concentrate at a spot of dried chewing gum stuck to the footpath. It wasn’t any use. The giggle forced itself out through her nose. Along with a dollop of snot.

“Oh, sorry,” she giggled, wiping the snot from her face. “An indoor *plant*?”

Noora raised her eyebrows. “Yup,” she said.

“Oh *God*,” Phoebe said and let the giggles overtake her.

By the time Tara appeared on the hospital’s front steps two hours later, the media throng had expanded to cover the entire footpath. A helicopter hovered overhead. There was none of the sombre atmosphere you would usually expect to find at a hospital vigil; the

reporters and photographers had been delighting in the rumours about Delahunty's broken indoor plant all morning. Not that any of them would be poking fun or questioning his intent *in print*: you couldn't do that to a suicidal man without the mental health lobby jumping down your throat, and anyway a suicide attempt made for much better copy.

"Hi guys," Tara said. "Thanks so much for coming. Calvin will be really touched—"

"Hey, you back working for Calvin again?" Tom Nguyen from the *Daily Mail* shouted. "When did that happen?"

"Miss me?" Tara flirted. "Now, just a couple of ground rules for the doorstep—"

"Oh you have to be fucking kidding me," Noora muttered.

"I'll just get you to move back a little from the ramp; the hospital has said the minister needs to be in a wheelchair just till he's safely in the ComCar."

"What no scooter?" someone yelled. Tara laughed. "No, there will be *no* Vespa today. I will personally kill him if he tries that!" She laughed again. "So are we all ready?"

The cameramen shuffled in their positions, which they had occupied for two hours but which suddenly seemed inadequate. The reporters huddled and jostled and tried to get their Dictaphones closest to the action.

"There he is!" someone shouted. And over the heads and outstretched arms, Phoebe could see the tops of the hospital's glass doors sliding open. The throng, which couldn't get any more tightly packed, surged forward, amoeba-like, sprouting arms and Dictaphones and sound-sticks and bellowing questions. Phoebe managed to squeeze her way to the front just in time to see a beefy, disgruntled-looking nurse deposit Calvin's

wheelchair outside the Hospital entrance before escaping back inside. Calvin gingerly lifted a hand to wave at the crowd.

“Wow,” he said, drawing the hand back over his heart. “I didn’t expect such a reception.”

“No,” Noora muttered to Phoebe, “you just planned it!”

Phoebe suppressed a giggle. “Or planted it?”

Noora guffawed.

Phoebe couldn’t remember the last time she’d had so much fun.

“How’re you feeling Minister?” someone yelled.

Calvin tugged at the opening of his shirt, rubbing ostentatiously at his neck, which as far as Phoebe could tell was unmarked.

“Oh, a little bit wobbly,” Calvin said, chuckling. “But you know me, I’ll be OK!”

Someone began to ask the Minister to explain what had happened. Phoebe felt herself being pushed forward as something like a Mexican Wave moved through the throng.

“Excuse me. Excuse me, please,” a young female voice said and Phoebe recognised the receptionist from Calvin’s office pushing through the crowd. “I have some people who want to see the Minister.”

Trailing behind the receptionist, looking terrified and clutching a bunch of flowers each, Phoebe saw Halani and Mo. Behind *them* was George Bok, the young Congolese boy, looking equally frightened.

Phoebe turned to watch Calvin catch sight of the children. As he rose from the wheelchair, stretched out his arms and limped towards them, lower lip trembling, Phoebe almost laughed aloud. Had he planned this too?

“How did you get here?” he whispered, loudly, to the children.

The three children, now at the top of the stairs, pressed into one another, as though trying to make themselves invisible. Calvin squatted and tried to draw Mo into a hug, but the boy held his head back, out of the embrace. Calvin led the crowd as it laughed at the little boy’s sweet reluctance; Mo scanned them all with wide eyes.

Phoebe thought she saw Tara nudge Halani before the girl stepped forward and proffered her flowers to Calvin.

“We hear you are sick,” Halani said.

As Calvin looked up at Halani, Mo seized the opportunity to escape, and scuttled back behind his sister. Calvin stood then, opened his arms and Halani dutifully succumbed to the photo opportunity. Calvin, face to camera, let the tears flow.

“I think I am going to vomit,” Noora said, as Larissa pushed her out of the way.

“Are you getting this?” Larissa shouted at her cameraman. Then, satisfied the moment was being filmed, she called out to Calvin, “Minister, did you know these children were coming here today?” she asked.

Calvin shook his head, the tears still rolling.

“And how do you feel, seeing them here like this?” Larissa prodded.

“Oh,” Calvin said, his lip wobbling. He shook his head. “I’m sorry. I can’t—” and he dissolved again into tears. Halani, still in a headlock, twisted her neck to avoid the waterfall.

“Let me ask you this,” Larissa said, sounding like a school marm. “did you realise, when you attempted to—” she paused, “harm yourself, how much it would effect people?”

“No,” Calvin shook his head. “No, I didn’t.” He looked at Halani. The girl looked horrified.

“I am so sorry,” he said to her. “I know it was stupid. I just didn’t know anyone cared.”

“S’OK,” Halani said, staring at the ground in front of her, her cheeks red.

“No, really,” Calvin shook her elbows, “can you forgive me?”

Halani nodded, looking like she would rather be back in Afghanistan.

Tara stepped in front of the Minister and the children. “Sorry guys,” she said, raising her hands to the media throng, “we’re going to have to leave it at that—as you can appreciate, the Minister needs his rest—”

Calvin smiled ruefully, as he forced his hands into Halani and Mo’s, and began to walk to the waiting ComCar.

“Fuck!” Noora said beside Phoebe. “Isn’t anyone going to ask why he tried to hang himself from an *indoor plant* the day he’s hit with a scandal?”

Larissa turned to face her, eyes twinkling. “Oh come on, Scrooge. Which is prettier? These kids or a whole bunch of auditors saying proper *process* wasn’t followed?”

A volley of questions—Would he stay? Would he resign? Was it true he’d planned to adopt refugee children?—followed Calvin to the waiting Comcar. He paused in front of the car door and scanned the crowd until he found Phoebe.

“Phoebe Valor,” he said stiffly.

Phoebe’s breath caught in her throat. She felt her face pulse red as the eyes of the crowd turned on her.

“That story you asked our office to verify?” Calvin said, “Well, I don’t know who’s been feeding you this stuff, but you’ve been sold a pup.”



The spring that that had been wound taut in her for months suddenly snapped and Phoebe caught herself beaming back at Calvin.

“Just doing my job, Minister,” she said.

“Yes, well,” Calvin said, his left eye twitching— or was it winking?— “I’ve never read such a pile of rubbish. And just so you know, if it ever gets printed, I’ll be going to the Press Council.”

At that he turned, ruffled George’s hair, waved presidentially at the crowd and ducked into the back seat of the car.

“Wow,” Larissa said to Phoebe, a look of respect on her face. “What did *you* do?”

“Yeah,” said Tom, appearing at Larissa’s elbow. “You about to break some big story and scoop us all again?”

Phoebe laughed. “No, no,” she said. “Don’t worry about it,” she said.

“Delahunty’s right for once. Just a bit of a red herring.”

“Well, thank goodness for that,” Larissa said. “Hate to have to bin all that stuff with the kids. I’ll have the lead with *that* vision.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Calvin took a deep breath. “Here goes nothing,” he whispered to himself.

He slid out of the Comcar; he was sure he could hear the click of camera flashes. Not surprising. It was his first day back at Parliament since the accident. It had been four weeks and the Press were desperate to get pictures of him. He had bought a new suit for the occasion, had a session with Tara’s hairstylist and he’d been *religious* about his fitness regime. He wasn’t a vain man, but it would be silly to come unprepared for such intense media attention.

Ordinarily, Calvin would get to his office through the Ministerial doors of Parliament, but Tara and he had thought it best to go through the House of Representatives that morning. Most news outlets staked out the House of Reps—more passing traffic there than Ministerial or the Senate—and Calvin didn’t want to force the reporters to choose between their usual duties and getting something from Calvin. One didn’t make friends that way!

“Welcome back, Minister!” chirped a young brunette that Calvin recognised from one of the commercial radio stations.

Calvin reached the top of the stairs that led to the entrance. He was glad he’d been working out. His photos would make a nice counterpoint to the snaps of all those other MPs struggling up the stairs!

“Good morning!” he said.

“Good to be back?” the brunette asked.

“Oh yes,” Calvin said. “It’s wonderful to be back.”

Someone coughed.

Calvin cleared his throat. “Look, just while I’ve got you all here—”

The journalists were silent.

“Oh!” exclaimed the brunette. She pulled a Dictaphone from her duffle coat and stuck it in the vicinity of Calvin’s mouth. He smiled.

“Could I say a quick thank you to all my supporters and well-wishers? It has been a truly humbling experience finding out just how many of you care.”

There were no questions. Calvin tried to work out whether the single television camera in attendance was actually on.

“Well ... ah ... thanks chaps,” Calvin said, “and, pardon me, lady,” he chuckled. He was surprised there were only four journos on the door. It was 8.37am. There was probably some other media thing on. And no doubt most people didn’t know he was back yet. The media interest would pick up as soon as the news got out. Unless they were all waiting for him outside the *Ministerial* Entrance after all?! His stomach dropped. Bloody *hell*. Bloody Tara! He coughed.

Calvin tried to sound casual. “So, what else is going on this morning?” he asked.

The reporters looked at him blankly. Who on earth *employed* these dolts, he wondered.

“Something happening over at Ministerial?”

One of the male reporters grunted. It sounded like a grunt in the negative, but Calvin couldn’t be sure.

“Anyway,” he said, trying not to let his irritation show, “I’d best be off. Lots to catch up on ... yada yada yada.”

Calvin got through security as quickly as was humanly possible, given the security guards all had to say how happy they were to see him back yada yada. Lovely, of course, but didn't they realise a chap was busy? As soon as he'd made it through the scanning machines, he called Tara.

"It's me," he said. "What's happening at Ministerial?... Really? Because there was *no one* at the Reps entrance ... Well, OK there were four, but no one *I* knew. There must be something else going on. Find out— ...Well, have you checked whether there's something going on at the Senate Entrance ...No? ... Right. Right. Well, that *is* strange ... You did put it out that I was coming back *today*? ... Yes, yes, I know I told you not to do it *officially*, but you did mention it, didn't you? ...Yes, yes, OK. OK," he sighed. "Well, I guess they're saving their vision for question time."

Calvin was still on the phone to Tara when he arrived at the office and walked through the open double doors to see Tara standing in the middle of reception and gesticulating at the ceiling.

"Minister!" she gasped, catching sight of him and clutching her phone to her chest. "I thought you were—"

Calvin narrowed his eyes. Had she been gesticulating about *him*? That *would* be brave, given he'd only just taken her back ...

Tara recovered herself then clapped loudly, summoning the receptionist, Calvin's chief of staff, Martha, the policy officers and office dogsbodies from somewhere beyond reception. Calvin noticed a spray of balloons tied to his office door.

"I thought—" Martha began.

"Yes, well," Tara said rolling her eyes. "*Someone* decided to come early!"

She turned to Calvin. "WELCOME BACK!!!"

The others clapped.

A surprise party! Calvin felt rather moved. He'd told Tara he didn't want a fuss, but he supposed he'd given them such a fright ...

He put his hand over his heart. "Thank you," he said, his voice wobbling. "I told you not to—"

"Oh shush!" Tara hit his arm. "As if!"

"As IF!" echoed the receptionist, now brandishing a cake. Calvin racked his brains for her name.

"Thank you," he said, clearing his throat and thinking up a few dot points on which to speak. "I couldn't have done it without your support—"

His mobile rang; the Treasurer's name popped up on the screen.

Calvin smiled beneficently at his team. "Sorry chaps. Treasurer calls! I'd better take it ... But as I said, thank you. Again." Calvin waved them back to their offices. The receptionist hovered, holding the cake.

"Let's do the cake later, shall we?" he said.

Tara shooed her away.

"Tara?" Calvin said, pushing the door to his office. "Give me five minutes, then come through, OK? We need to come up with a media strategy for the day. Oh. And could we organise some coffee? Soy latte?" Calvin put the phone to his ear.

"Mike! How are you, old chap?"

As he waited for Tara to get back with the coffee, Calvin sorted through his in tray: a few handwritten letters—he tossed those *straight* in the bin, anyone who wrote with a pen was

too old to be of any use—a couple of journal articles; PR waffle; and some press clippings from Media Monitors. There were surprisingly few clips given they were delivered daily and Calvin had ordered the agency to collect *anything* with his name in it. Perhaps Tara had filed some to save him being overwhelmed on his first day back. She was always trying to baby him. Annoying as it could be, Calvin had to admit he *could* be a bit hopeless, head always in the clouds, always thinking about the big picture. He'd forget his own head if it weren't tied on! Calvin chuckled at himself and checked the dates of the media clips. They *did* seem to cover the whole four weeks ... But he supposed the refugee issue had gone off a bit quiet during his illness. And of course the *Trib* still hadn't replaced Phoebe Valor.

Calvin shook his head. Poor girl. According to Tara, who'd heard it from Phoebe's old workmate Matilda, Phoebe had had some sort of a mental breakdown. Calvin *had* noticed her acting very strangely on the day he left hospital. He could have sworn he'd heard her giggling through the press conference. Giggling! When someone had just come back from the brink of death! And she the one who had encouraged him to— Calvin shivered. He had promised himself he would *not* think about all that. As far as he was concerned, it had never happened. Yes, all in all, it was a good thing that Phoebe had left the *Trib*. At least that was the official line: that she had quit. Matilda et al were saying different. That she was forced yada yada yada. Frankly, it didn't matter to Calvin. The last he'd heard, she'd gone travelling around Central Australia with that horrible pommy doctor she'd always had the hots for. The whole breakdown thing was a blessing, really. It would have been awkward if Phoebe had stuck around thinking she was his favourite reporter or that they had some sort of special relationship. It had been useful for Calvin to have close relationships with certain scribes while he was still making his name,

but now he was a serious leadership contender it would be career suicide. And he *was* a serious contender. No less than three Newspolls had run his name in the PPM (preferred Prime Minister) question alongside the PM's, Treasurer's, and Opposition Leader's. Of course Calvin's numbers weren't anywhere near the others'. Yet. But that was not the point. It was practically unheard of for an Immigration Minister to even register in the preferred PM stakes. The fact that he'd even been mentioned was huge. Calvin smiled.

He looked at his watch. 9.46. Where *was* Tara? The parliamentary café was always busy on sitting mornings, but this was ridiculous. He got a mental image of Tara trying to get the coffee back to him, but being accosted every two steps by someone desperate for the latest news about Calvin. He giggled. His latte was probably stone cold!

At 2.34 PM, Calvin pushed through the heavy wooden doors of the House of Representatives and made for the roar of the parliamentary pit. A shiver of excitement ran up his spine.

Question time had just begun and everyone had already taken their seats. He hated to draw attention to himself by coming in late but if he'd come in any earlier he would have had to stop and talk to each person individually, which would have been interminable. Plus, Tara thought the press was more likely to cover his return if there were a standing ovation.

The Opposition benches saw him first. The Shadow Finance Minister nudged the Opposition Leader. The Opposition Leader, in turn, whispered something across the table to the PM who turned to look at Calvin, and nodded curtly.

“Horrible man,” Calvin muttered under his breath. The PM was about the only person in parliament, apart from his equally horrible chief of staff Martin Suitor, who was *not* happy to see Calvin.

By now the Government front bench had seen Calvin. The Treasurer leapt to his feet and started to clap. And then the Finance Minister, the Deputy, Alasdair, Marshal ... As Calvin descended the stairs to take his place, the rest of the House rose—the Opposition benches, the independents, the press gallery and even, finally, the PM. It was just like a film.

Calvin nodded and waved, trying to look modest. This would definitely make the papers. He couldn’t remember any other politician getting such a reception after an illness. Finally, he made it to his seat. Next to Mike. He motioned his fellow MPs to sit, *sit*, but they wouldn’t stop clapping. It took at least a minute until they finally all sat. Even then, the Treasurer called for a delay in normal business to welcome him back. Of course then the PM was forced to respond with his own welcome, even though everyone could tell he was absolutely *seething*.

It was fair to say that Calvin’s accident had *not* been positive for the PM. But, thought Calvin, the man had only himself to blame. Indeed there had been credible reports that it was the PM’s *office* that had put the HIV story about. Certainly, it was the PM’s office that had fanned the flames. Well, *that* had backfired. Spectacularly. Not, of course, that Calvin had foreseen any of this at the time—he had just felt so desperate he couldn’t see any other way out—but there was no denying it in retrospect: his brush with death had been a great career move.

He kicked out his legs and sunk into the green leather. He felt as though he had come home. He sighed with pleasure and cocked his neck to try and rest his head on the



straight back of the seat. He chuckled. He'd forgotten how bloody uncomfy these seats were! Calvin ran his eyes over the hunched back of the PM. The old man didn't look so frightening these days. Hunted, more like. The last two Newspolls had the PM trailing Mike and the Opposition Leader as preferred Prime Minister. And then of course there was the little matter of *Calvin* making the PPM poll.

"Can the Prime Minister explain why the Treasurer has been absent from the Government's last three economic announcements?" the shadow Treasurer asked, smirking and pausing to let the question sink in and the roars of laughter to begin.

Calvin bit the corner of his mouth to hide a smile. So, Question Time would be all about the PM's popularity. Or lack thereof.

"Does it have anything to do with the Treasurer's status as preferred Prime Minister?" the Shadow Treasurer finished.

Mike guffawed loudly to Calvin's right, flicking his hand to show he thought the question nonsense, though of course he didn't. Calvin wondered if Mike had fed the question to the Opposition himself.

"Can't wait to see how the old prick answers that one," he whispered to Calvin.

Calvin, pantomiming his own outrage at the question, whispered back: "and did you see his face when *I* came in?"

Mike snickered. "I give him three weeks. At most."

Calvin snorted his agreement. But an unpleasant thought had just forced itself into his mind. What if there was a putsch and Mike got PM? He would probably make Calvin Deputy Leader, which would be *great*—he needed to move on from Immigration if he weren't to be typecast—but what would that do to his own leadership ambitions? It would make he and Mike competitors. Unless, of course, Calvin was willing to be a loyal

deputy. Which, *obviously*, he was. But he wasn't at all sure his supporters would be happy to see him stop at the penultimate rung on the ladder. Surely he owed it to them, to Australia, to find the fullest expression of his talents? To serve his country to the best of his ability? Much as he loved Mike, he just wasn't sure what kind of a PM he'd make.

"Hear! Hear!!" Mike shouted loudly as the PM lowered himself back into his chair.

A timorous backbencher from South Australia got to her feet and, struggling to be heard above the yahooing, asked the agriculture minister about the latest trade figures for Australian Wool.

The massive bulk of the Agriculture Minister served to block the press gallery's view of the PM and half the front bench. Seizing the opportunity, Mike rolled a piece of paper between his fingers and flicked it at the back of the PM's neck.

Calvin snickered appreciatively in Mike's direction. But part of him couldn't help wishing the press gallery were able to witness the Treasurer's behaviour. Mike was a dear friend, but PM material?

Calvin quickly calculated his numbers. Not that he was planning to challenge. Well, not yet. If there *were* to be a spill, it wouldn't hurt to be prepared. Indeed if he didn't throw his hat in the ring, people might assume he wasn't prepared to take on the leadership.

Marshall and Alasdair would definitely back him. And the women; fairly or not, Mike was generally considered a bit of a boor. Calvin on the other hand had been voted third runner up in the "best looking pollie" competition at last year's press gallery ball. Calvin surreptitiously ran his eyes over the backbenches. Timothy Snyder, he'd vote for

Mike; Amanda Whatsername, she'd vote for Calvin; William Temple, he was one of Alasdair's chums, so Calvin could count on him—

“Hear! Hear!” Mike shouted as the Ag Minister lumbered back to his seat.

“Bravo!” Calvin shouted, making a mental note to have Tara arrange drinks for Alistair and the boys. He wondered whether he should take Alastair into his confidence. Get him to start doing the numbers. The problem was it didn't matter how discreet Alistair was, it wouldn't be long before every one knew Calvin was making a play for the leadership. Of course he would make sure everyone knew that he was only doing it because his supporters had pushed ... suddenly an idea popped into Calvin's head. Maybe Alistair could say he was doing the numbers without Calvin's knowledge, in order to convince him to run ...

Calvin observed Mike from the corner of his eye. The Treasurer had his eyes closed, a wad of policy briefings resting, unopened, on his beer belly. Calvin patted his own six-pack. He wondered if he should make some policy announcements before he ran? Show he had substance. Though, whatever he did, he certainly wouldn't be letting any more bloody refugees go! *God!* He was so *over* immigration. If only he were in a portfolio that wasn't so dependent on people. And *needy* people! Urghhh! Give him some lovely clean numbers or cute fluffy little sheep or schools ... chaps with those portfolios didn't know how easy they had it. No desperate children with pleading eyes to haunt your sleep. No people with names who got diseases and killed themselves. Just nice, ordered systems and rules: yes to this, no to that...

Calvin almost jumped out of his seat. Of course! It was perfect! Too, *too* perfect. He would get rid of Section 417! It was the perfect reform. It showed he was humble about his own failings *and* genuinely concerned about improving policy. It would win

them back the rednecks that hated refugees, but keep hold of the bleeding hearts that loved them. Plus it would stop any pesky criticisms of his past actions; he had mended his ways, had he not?

From now on, computers and administrators would be the only ones with any influence over whether an asylum seeker was allowed to stay or be sent back. After all, as Calvin could attest—he could even see himself saying it, *mea culpa* style—emotion and pity could really cloud a person’s judgement.

Much safer to stay out of it.

THE END.

Realisms Traditional, Tragic, Depressive and Moral: The  
changing fiction of Jonathan Franzen

## INTRODUCTION

“As the decades pass, the postmodern program, the notion of formal experimentation as an act of resistance, begins to seem seriously misconceived.” (Franzen 2002a, p. 107)

Jonathan Franzen.

“The non-normative has become the norm.” (Eagleton 2003, p. 16)

Terry Eagleton.

Jonathan Franzen’s literary life story, as he tells it, goes something like this: the aspiring young writer who thinks “it would be cool to make up stories for a living” goes to university where he learns that the greatest novels were “tricky in their methods, resisted casual reading and merited sustained study” (Franzen 2002a, p. 103). He becomes enthralled by Jacques Derrida, by feminist and Marxist critics, by “people whose job (it) was to find fault with modern Systems” and begins to think that he too “could become socially useful by writing fault-finding fiction” (Franzen 2002a, p. 103). He identifies a “canon” he intends to join, led by luminaries like Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo and William Gaddis, stylistically diverse writers who, nonetheless, “shared the postmodern suspicion of realism” (Franzen 2002a, p. 103), of character and of other conventional components of fiction.

But there was a problem. Franzen didn’t actually *like* the postmodern faultfinding, anti-realist fiction of the kind he was trying to emulate. Characters, for all they were suspect constructs, were something, “to my shame, I seemed to need” (Franzen 2002a, p.

103). After writing two critically acclaimed but largely unread “Systems”<sup>1</sup> or postmodern novels, Franzen writes several essays in which he claims to have abandoned the social novel and / or corrective fiction (Franzen 1996, p. 84) as well as experimental postmodernism (Franzen 2002a)<sup>2</sup>. He then goes on to publish two mainstream bestsellers, feature on the cover of *Time* Magazine (Grossman 2010) and have tea with the US President (Barack Obama).

For Franzen’s critics, his recent success is a product of his flight from experimental postmodern fiction back into the arms of a pre-modernist realism. Franzen, this argument goes, was disappointed enough by the commercial failure of his first two (experimental) novels that he gave up his artistic ambition and took refuge in traditional fictional forms. Indeed, critics like academic and author Ben Marcus charge Franzen with not only selling out, but having the gall to attack experimental writing so that he could “feel more comfortable with this capitulation ... medicate his regret over the road not taken”.

(B)ecause the formal ambition of his first two novels had failed to win him fame, he resolved to renounce formal ambition itself, to spurn the idea that writing might change into something newer and more vital. (Marcus 2005, p. 43)

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<sup>1</sup> The term “Systems novel” appears to have been first used by Tom LeClair in his 1987 book, *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel*, (LeClair 1987, LeClair article referring to his upcoming book). In articles read by this author, including that of Ty Hawkins, the Systems novel seems defined as being concerned with the web of interconnections that make up the global system and render the individual powerless. Franzen himself uses the phrase “Systems novel” interchangeably with “postmodern novel” and sees the enterprise of both as being “to resist absorption or co-optation by an all-absorbing, all-coopting System.” (Franzen 2002a, p. 108).

<sup>2</sup> Franzen often portrays literary postmodernism as being, by definition, corrective fiction. This is evident in his belief that it was the job of postmodernists to “find fault with modern systems” (Franzen 2002a, p. 103). As he sees it, the postmodern writer’s refusal to truck with realism is *in itself* a cultural critique. (see Franzen 2002a, p. 103, Franzen quoting Klinkowitz). Further, Franzen appears to conflate corrective fiction with the idea of the ‘Social Novel’ in so far as he sees both as attempts to engage with and address contemporary culture.

It is not just about literature. Because the *raison d'être* of the Systems novel is to critique the hegemony of consumer capitalism, Franzen's abandonment of the form and his resultant commercial success seem proof to his critics that he is a turncoat in a broader political sense: the teenage leftie has turned prop of the capitalist system.

For these critics, Franzen's high profile spat with Oprah Winfrey must seem emblematic of the author's capitulation to the System. In 2001, Franzen's third novel, *The Corrections*, was selected for Oprah's Book Club and the author himself invited to appear on Winfrey's show. But before the show aired, Franzen admitted he cringed at the thought of his work being included among the sometimes "schmaltzy books" on Winfrey's list "even though I think she's really smart and she's really fighting the good fight". Franzen compounded the offence by speaking of Winfrey's imprimatur in the context of a split between "high-art" literature and "entertaining books" and admitting he didn't want her book club sticker—"that logo of corporate ownership"—on his work (Lea 2010, quoting Franzen). Winfrey scrubbed *The Corrections* from her Book Club list and cancelled plans to interview Franzen. A decade later however, all was forgiven. Franzen was re-admitted to the Winfrey fold, his latest bestseller, *Freedom*, was selected for her book club and Franzen himself wrote the questions for Winfrey's Book Club members.

For all that it's set in the literary realm, Franzen's is a story common to the point of cliché: the young radical, beset by the realities of age and life, abandons radicalism in favour of traditional values. But is this narrative accurate? Can it explain the difference between Franzen's early novels and his later work? Or is his embrace of literary realism evidence of something else altogether? Is it, in fact, evidence of his continuing rebellion against the hegemony of consumer capitalism?



It is the contention of this thesis that while Franzen's later fiction does not offer a postmodern critique in the same vein as his first two novels, neither is it a retreat into pre-modernist realism nor a capitulation to market forces. I will argue that Franzen's later work continues to critique late capitalism<sup>3</sup> as defined by the theorist Fredric Jameson. Further, Franzen's continued opposition to the dominant culture suggests that despite his own apparent claims to the contrary, he has not given up writing corrective fiction. It is just that his definition of what has to be corrected, and how it can be, has changed. Indeed, I will argue that it is Franzen's opposition to advanced capitalism that is partly responsible for his abandonment of postmodernism as a literary form. As he sees it, literary postmodernism is part of the problem, part of the enabling architecture of the capitalist System. Its fault-finding, its assumption that people and society can be 'corrected', give truth to the lie of advanced capitalism: that the human condition is solvable, a lie that Franzen himself calls "therapeutic optimism" (Franzen 1996, p. 78).

Instead of going back to pre-modernist forms, as though theory and its discoveries had never occurred, Franzen's later work moves *beyond* postmodernism in search of a new literary form that can maintain a critical distance from, and therefore offer an analysis of, the advanced capitalist society in which we find ourselves. As such, Franzen's more recent writing has much in common with the emerging literary genre that has been called, by turns, post-postmodernism (McLaughlin 2004), the New Sincerity (Kelly 2010) or simply, after theory (Eagleton 2003). I will offer a more detailed definition of post-postmodernism in Chapter Three with reference to the work of David Foster Wallace, Adam Kelly and Terry Eagleton. At this point however, it will suffice to mention that by academic Adam

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<sup>3</sup> While Jameson identifies the contemporary global consumer capitalism as "late capitalism", the British Marxist theorist Terry Eagleton points out—rightly, I think—that a better term might be advanced capitalism given we do not know how much further capitalism has to go.

Kelly's reckoning post-postmodernism evinces a "concern with sincerity" and human connection not seen since before the advent of modernism (Kelly 2010, p. 2155/4038).

I will frame my arguments through a close textual analysis of Franzen's use of the Christian holidays—namely, Christmas, Easter and Thanksgiving—in the three novels in which they are most in evidence: *The Twenty-Seventh City*, *The Corrections* and *Freedom*. That these holidays are thematically important in Franzen's work is suggested not only by their ubiquity, but also by comments he made in a 2003 interview with Australian author and academic Gabrielle Carey, in which he said:

There's a sort of fugitive nature to the individual. You can find parts of life where you are still very specific, particularly, I would say, in relation to your family.

There are those times of year, for example holidays, where you can't escape the fact that you are not in fact the creation of the products you've bought but indeed the product of these weird old people who are expecting you to spend Easter with them. (Carey 2003, p. 186)

To Franzen then, these holidays function as sanctuaries, albeit partial, from the onslaught of late capitalism. The capitalist definition of the individual as consumer, and related postmodern ideas about the subject, do not yet dominate at these times.

There is another clue to what Christian holidays represent for Franzen in the conceptual link he draws between them and reading, a pursuit he views as counter-cultural (Franzen 1995, 1996). Reading for Franzen represents something about what it means to be human. Indeed, he links the "eclipse of the written" (Franzen 2002b, p. 33)

with the materialist view of the individual that is increasingly taking hold in postmodern culture (Franzen 2002b, p. 33). In his 1995 essay, “The Reader in Exile”, Franzen draws extensively from the work of Steve Birkerts noting, with approval, that the author of *The Gutenberg Elegies* sees reading as a catalyst for self awareness and its waning popularity evidence of “a transformation of the very nature of humanity” akin to “living in the shallows of what it means to be human and not knowing the difference” (Franzen 1995, p. 173). Franzen links the symbolic power of reading with Christmas through *The Corrections*’ Chip Lambert who becomes terrified at the thought of reading. He “hadn’t read a novel in at least a year. The prospect frightened him nearly as much as the prospect of Christmas in St. Jude” (Franzen 2001, p. 527). Chip’s is a temporary inability that also afflicted his maker. Franzen has elsewhere written of the depression he suffered before he completed *The Corrections* and during which he was unable to bring himself to read (Franzen 1996, p. 64). For Franzen, it seems, holidays and reading are among the last refuges of the “fugitive” human individual (Carey 2003, p. 186) in a consumer culture that peddles the idea that “if you get this particular kind of Nike sneakers you are going to achieve that American dream of being an individual” (Carey 2003, p. 186). And because they are at least partially counter-cultural, these holidays function as a vantage point from which Franzen can leverage the critical distance he needs to critique the dominant culture.<sup>4</sup>

The Christian holidays also provide a useful analytical frame because of their relevance to the tradition of the social novel, a tradition against which Franzen has repeatedly defined his own work. Indeed some accounts associate the contemporary

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<sup>4</sup> Frederic Jameson argues that one of the markers of late capitalism is that any pockets of resistance have been subsumed so that there is now nowhere left from which to gain the critical distance crucial to a proper analysis of the phenomenon.

American Christmas with that archetypal social novelist, Charles Dickens, who famously used his book, *A Christmas Carol*, to highlight inequality and push for its eradication (Belk 1989). Why would Christmas and the other Christian holidays be useful for a social novelist? Thanks partly to Dickens' influence, these holidays are imbued with a sense of what society should be like: of functioning family relationships, of the strong caring for the weak, of God's relationship to humanity, of humanity generally. This ideal, generally missing from everyday life, has the paradoxical effect of showing up society's poverty all the more. The conflict is captured by the character of Ellen Griswold in National Lampoon's *Christmas Vacation* who says: "I don't know what to say, except it's Christmas, and we're all in misery". The humour of the line comes from the hope that Christmas would be the one time when we wouldn't suffer. In the gap between the ideal and the real, the novelist finds a gold mine of hypocrisy and irony. And beyond their literary utility, because these holidays proffer a kind of Platonic ideal, they provide the social novelist with a way of encouraging readers to pursue the possible rather than settle for the real.

Of course, perceptions of these holidays have changed a great deal since Dickens' time. The conflict they present is no longer simply between the real and the ideal. In our post-Christian age they have become highly contested: battlegrounds between competing ideologies such as secularism and religious fundamentalism, consumerism and asceticism, nationalism and multiculturalism. Right wing commentators accuse secular governments of a conspiratorial attack on Christmas. Fox News' John Gibson for example, is engaged in a "war" to take back December 25 as attested to by the publication of his book, *The War on Christmas: how the liberal plot to ban the sacred Christian holiday is worse than you think*. On the other side of the political spectrum, there are examples of Christian nativity displays

ruled unconstitutional in local government buildings (*County of Allegheny v. American Civil Liberties Union, Greater Pittsburgh Chapter* (No. 87-2050) 1989) and religious Christmas carols banned in public schools (Rundquist 2010). In their contestability, these holidays reflect in microcosm the great battles being waged in postmodern America as well as the lack of shared norms that is such a defining characteristic of postmodernism. And this contestability enables Franzen to explore and critique the contradictions and anomie of our late capitalist society and the postmodern culture with which it walks in lockstep.

Chapter One of this thesis discusses Franzen's novels through the frame of Fredric Jameson's theory of late capitalism. In particular, I focus on what Jameson identifies as one of the main symptoms of late-stage capitalism: the "prodigious expansion" of the market, which is also one of the key concerns of Franzen's fiction. I also discuss Franzen's critique of two other symptoms identified by Jameson, namely, the breakdown in systems of meaning that accompanies advanced capitalism as well as the apotheosis of capitalism itself. I end this chapter with reference to Jacques Derrida's theory of the gift and, through that theory, consider whether Franzen's fiction provides a vision of capitulation to market domination or of rebellion against it.

Chapter Two examines Franzen's treatment of character and considers what such treatment says about the author's view of late capitalist and postmodern concepts of the individual subject. This analysis is done with reference to the theories of Terry Eagleton and the academic Robert Maria Dainotto in addition to those of Jameson.

In Chapter Three, I argue that the changes in Franzen's fiction suggest he has found a new way to oppose advanced capitalism and the cultural postmodernism he sees as its natural extension. I argue that Franzen's later fiction is properly understood as post-

postmodern and locate his struggle with the problems and possibilities of ‘corrective fiction’ or the social novel within the broader struggle that gave birth to this new literary genre.

I conclude this thesis by asking whether or not Franzen’s later novels come closer to fulfilling the mission of the social novel than do his earlier attempts, or whether, indeed, they offer a new vision of the form and aims of such a novel.

## CHAPTER ONE: THE CHRISTMAS OF LATE CAPITALISM.

### I

Near the beginning of Franzen's third novel, *The Corrections*, the out-of-work academic and writer Chip Lambert—who bears more than a passing resemblance to his creator—is forced to sell a library of books on literary and cultural theory to fund his seduction of a student. Offered \$65 for a collection he had expected to net \$3,900, Chip:

turned away from their reproachful spines, remembering how each of them had called out in a bookstore with a promise of a radical critique of late-capitalist society, and how happy he'd been to take them home. But Jurgen Habermas didn't have Julia's long, cool, pear-tree limbs, Theodor Adorno didn't have Julia's grapy smell of lecherous pliability, Fred Jameson didn't have Julia's artful tongue (Franzen 2001, p. 106).

We are not told which of Fredric Jameson's books Chip ditches in favour of Julia's artful tongue, but it was perhaps *Postmodernism or the cultural logic of late capitalism*. It is in this book that Jameson paints a society so firmly in the grip of late capitalism that even culture and literary theory, of the kind that Chip's books propound, are impotent. It's a depiction that bears a striking resemblance to the fictional Franzian universe.

In this chapter I propose to show how Jonathan Franzen uses the Christian holidays of Christmas, Easter and Thanksgiving to explore and critique late capitalism, a late capitalism that looks very much like the one described by Jameson.

In the Jamesonian vision of late capitalist society the last remaining pockets of pre-market capitalism have disappeared. The cultural sphere, art, the family and the mind have all been colonised. “(E)ven overtly political interventions like those of *The Clash* are all somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves might well be considered a part, since they can achieve no distance from it.” (Jameson 1991, p. 49) Art and literature must now adhere to the rules of the marketplace like any other consumer good; the cultural sphere must churn out “ever more novel-seeming goods” (Jameson 1991, p. 4) with built-in obsolescence to keep the consumer coming back for more. The market colonisation of previously untouched spheres brings in its wake a new cultural populism; the walls between high and mass culture are torn down. The imperialism is so total, Jameson argues, that any critique of postmodernism in the cultural sphere is now also, by default, a critique of late capitalism and vice versa.

In a world ruled by the market, products exist (in the consumer mind at least) as reified ends in themselves, independent of the blood, sweat and lives that produced them and unrelated to their once-intended use. The culture of the image and the simulacrum, which Plato defined as a copy of something that has never existed (Jameson 1991, p. 18), is dominant. “(T)he culture of the simulacrum comes to *life* in a society where exchange value has been generalised to the point at which the very memory of use value is effaced” (Jameson 1991, p. 18).



And the totality of the market's reach, the impossibility of our comprehending the billions of connections and linkages in the global network that supports market capitalism, leads to the apotheosis of capitalism itself. What Edmund Burke referred to as the "sublime"—an Other so incomprehensible as to strike terror into the human mind—and which was once explicable only in terms of the forces of nature or of the divine, is now identified with the "enormous properly human and anti-natural power of dead human labour stored up in our machinery" (Jameson 1991, p. 35). That is, in other words, the decentralized and globalized network of capital movements. This power has been alienated to such an extent from its human creators that it "turns back on and against us in unrecognizable forms and seems to constitute the massive dystopian horizon of our collective as well as our individual praxis" (Jameson 1991, p. 35). Jameson sees a reflection of our inability to grasp let alone represent this network that rules our lives in the recent proliferation of conspiracy theories and literature, which he calls "a degraded attempt ... to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system" (Jameson 1991, p. 38).

However, despite Jameson's description of the totality of the late-capitalist system, he does concede some remaining enclaves of resistance. His use of the phrase "cultural dominant" (Jameson 1991) for example, rather than a more definitive term like "postmodern culture", allows for the possibility of counter-cultural discrepancies. Similarly, Franzen's fictional worlds contain pockets of cultural resistance, among them the Christian holidays already mentioned. And because their co-option by capitalism is not yet total, it is still possible at these times to see the phenomenon as it really is; to observe the approaching tsunami from the beach, as it were, rather than trying to analyse it from amid the wash. Moreover, these holidays still allow for the existence of different

value systems against which Franzen can then compare the dominant culture. For this reason, these holidays are a useful entry point for an analysis of his fiction.

## II.

That marker of late capitalism which Jameson identifies as the “prodigious ... expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas” (Jameson 1991, p. 36) is one of the most striking features of Franzen’s fiction. Characters’ lives are set off course by shady business deals and incomprehensible movements of capital. Relationships are treated as transactions. The market rules. Christian holidays, as representative of the once at least theoretically separate sphere of religion and family—the ceasefire days on which trading stopped—become an apt metaphor for capitalism’s total dominance. By showing how even these holidays have been subverted, Franzen emphasises the terrible reality of late capitalism: that nothing, not even the sacred, is sacred.

Of course, in one sense there is nothing new about the commercialisation of holidays like Christmas and Easter. The early American Puritans banned Christmas celebrations as pagan (Belk 1989 paragraph 4) while critics railed against the rampant consumerism of the Yuletide season back in the late 1800s (Belk 1989 paragraph 11). Indeed, Russell Belk suggests the notion of the Christmas gift was *devised* by the advertising industry as a way of inducing consumers to spend more. The Christmas gift, he says, became a ‘sacred’ category of gift, separated from its commercial origins (hence the practice of removing price tags on gifts). Because it signified love and devotion, it was to be “above considerations of mere investment and money” (Belk 1989 paragraph 13). But advanced capitalism is no longer just simple consumerism; the market colonisation of

Christmas is no longer just about spending a lot of money on gifts. Capitalism in its late stages takes sinister new forms, and it is with these that Franzen is concerned.

In his first book, *The Twenty-Seventh City*, Christmas and Easter bookend the fall of the novel's protagonist, Martin Probst, from a successful and respected family man to a cuckold, adulterer, deserted father and plaything of market forces, as well as highlighting the emptiness of life in postmodern America. *The Twenty-Seventh City* tells the story of a conspiracy spearheaded by the new St Louis police chief, S. Jammu, and backed by several of her Indian compatriots. Jammu wants to orchestrate a merger between the St Louis city centre and county in order to bring the area under her control and to inflate real estate values for personal gain, but Martin Probst—who can't be bought or bent—is an obstacle to these plans. Chief Jammu and her cronies therefore decide to mentally destroy Probst—or put him in “The State”, as they describe it—so that he can offer no resistance to their plans. Probst's Job-like trials involve, respectively: the loss of his dog, his daughter, his wife and his reputation. But before he has lost everything, his destruction is foreshadowed by the invasion of the Probst family Christmas by corporate and conspiratorial forces. On Christmas morning, Martin Probst opens presents from his corporate suppliers—among them a clock radio from the “fabricators” Ickbey and Twoll—and makes note of the gifts for his secretary who will write his thank you cards (Franzen 1988, p. 263). The family gift exchange has been supplanted by corporate public relations. The corporate invasion of the Probst Christmas doesn't end there. In previous years, Martin Probst's daughter Luisa had opened the suppliers' presents, thus preserving a modicum of family tradition. This year however, Luisa is absent: she has left home to live with her boyfriend, in an arrangement that, unbeknownst to the couple, was orchestrated by Jammu's conspirators. The family Christmas is further subverted by the

Christmas Eve revelation that Probst's wife, Barbara, has been having an affair. And, although Barbara doesn't know it, her lover is part of the same conspiracy that took Luisa. Market totality is evident not only in the subversion of gift giving and family relationships by corporate interests, but also—keeping in mind Jameson's argument that conspiracy theories are attempts to explain market totality—in the very conspiracy on which the plot turns.

The capitalist 'takeover' of previously untouched enclaves is also explicit in the third of Franzen's novels, *The Corrections*, which follows the personal struggles of the five members of the Lambert clan. Characters think in market language and value almost everything in dollar terms. In preparation for the Christmas that is the climax of the narrative, for example, the family matriarch Enid Lambert keeps a Christmas budget on which each member of her family is given a monetary value based on the quality of their relationship with her, the presents they have bought her in the past, and whether or not they are coming home for Christmas. "Chip had forfeited her goodwill several Christmases ago by sending her a used-looking cookbook *Foods of Morocco* wrapped in aluminium foil and decorated with stick-on pictures of coat hangers with red slashes through them. Now that he was coming home from Lithuania, however, she wanted to reward him to the full extent of her gift budget" (Franzen 2001, p. 545). Enid's sons, Gary and Chip, refer to their mental health, their relationships and life itself using the language of the market. Again, this can be seen in relation to the Christian holidays. On Thanksgiving morning for example, Chip wakes up sober after days of drug-fuelled sex with a student and "(i)n a matter of seconds, like a market inundated by a wave of panic-selling, he was plunged into shame and self-consciousness" (Franzen 2001, p. 66). Later that same Thanksgiving, abandoned by the student, Chip sits on a "freezing guardrail" in

front of a minimart and takes “comfort in the sturdy mediocrity of American commerce, the unpretending metal and plastic roadside hardware” (Franzen 2001, p. 71). Here, an earlier industrial capitalism is seen as solid and understandable in comparison to the ungraspable totality of contemporary market capitalism.

Part of the totality of advanced capitalism is, as previously noted, the market co-option of art and culture. Jameson argues that these spheres, which the Modernists strove to keep separate from the market have, in late capitalism, been subsumed to such an extent that any critical capacity they might have had is gone. Art and culture are now products like any other. Even literary and cultural theory, which once held such promise of cultural critique, are now themselves just more Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCGs) propping up consumer capitalism (as Chip Lambert’s aforementioned hawking of cultural theory books attests). In Franzen’s most recent novel, *Freedom*—another family drama that focuses on the fortunes of Walter and Patty Berglund and their son, Joey—the postmodern commercialisation of Art is metaphorically represented in the person of ageing rocker Richard Katz, lead singer for the Traumatics.

The most traumatic events ever to befall the longtime front man of the Traumatics had been (1) receiving a Grammy nomination, (2) hearing his music played on National Public Radio and (3) deducing, from December sales figures that *Nameless Lake* had made the perfect little Christmas gift to leave beneath tastefully trimmed Christmas trees in several hundred thousand NPR-listening households. (Franzen 2010, p. 192)

Katz the cultural rebel has become the epitome of mainstream culture. His album—written following an affair with his best friend’s wife—is top of the Christmas wish list for the ‘right on’ customer who thinks they are immune to crass populism and yet, unwittingly, engages in just that. Katz’s affair with Patty Berglund becomes a commercial product. The Christmas tree, once the site of familial bliss, is subverted by adultery. And Katz’s *Art* is debased into just one more FMCG.

### III

It is not simply the colonisation of previously uncolonised spheres that differentiates late capitalism from its earlier manifestations, but according to Jameson, an unprecedented collapse in systems of meaning. What began with linguists pointing out the essentially arbitrary relationship between words and what they referred to, snowballs in advanced capitalism into a full “breakdown of the signifying chain” (Jameson 1991, p. 27). The relationships through which we had previously derived meanings have largely disappeared; signifiers no longer point to the signified but simply to other signifiers or signs. Words don’t reflect the reality of underlying objects, they point only to other words. In the labour sphere, this breakdown manifests in product reification or “the effacement of the traces of production”, a convenient development for consumerism since buyers “don’t want to have to think about Third World women every time (they) pull ... up to (their) word processor” (Jameson 1991, pp. 313-4). The breakdown is also manifest in the severing of currency from any underlying real value<sup>5</sup>. And in terms of history, it shows up

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<sup>5</sup> In his study of Derrida’s debt to the economist Milton Friedman, Michael Tratner argues that the “gradual dematerialization of money”—the sundering of the dollar from any underlying value of gold or silver, the move from metallic to fiduciary currency, increasing reliance on credit cards, and inflation—all

as “the disappearance of the historical referent” (Jameson 1991, p. 25), which is replaced by nostalgic histories and by simulacra of pasts that never existed. For Jameson, late capitalism is the age of the simulacrum, marked by “a whole historically original consumer appetite for a world transformed into sheer images of itself and for pseudo-events and ‘spectacles’.” (Jameson 1991, p. 18).

Jameson’s simulacra and broken chains of meaning are clearly echoed in the Christian holidays of Franzen’s fiction. Take *The Corrections*, much of which centres on Enid’s battle to have one last Christmas in the family home. Enid, her daughter Denise says, “loves Christmas the way other people love sex” (Franzen 2001, p. 498). On one level, this could be taken as an indicator of the frequency with which Enid thinks about Christmas. Certainly she is obsessed. But it seems Franzen is simultaneously commenting on the *nature* of this obsession. Enid’s Christmas is a lot like fantasy sex: it is an unreality based on a non-existent original. The perfect family Christmas of which she dreams has never occurred: indeed, the previous Christmas, Enid and Alfred left their son’s home two days early because of family conflict. In this, Enid’s Christmas reflects the “traditional Christmas” held so dear and fought over by the American people, but which is itself something of a simulacrum. Despite its reification, the ‘tradition’ of the modern American Christmas did not begin until the Victorian Age when novels such as Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* created an image of the family Christmas in the public consciousness (Belk 1989). Enid’s Christmas fantasy extends to her beloved Advent Calendar with its little Christ doll, an “icon not merely of the Lord but of her own three babies and of all the sweet baby-smelling babies of the world” (Franzen 2001, p. 544). But the doll, in its

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contributed to a growing awareness of the essential “fictionality” of money, which in turn “contributed to the plausibility of (deconstructionist) theories such as Derrida’s” (Tratner 2003, p. 798).

walnut shell crib, is both a simulacrum and an object severed from its intended meaning. Enid doesn't believe in Christ and was never quite such a deliriously happy mother of young children. The Christ doll thus signifies not the Christ-child, not actual babies, but the false *ideal* of babies.

The economic equivalent of linguistic deconstruction—that is, the severing of products from their means of production and their intended use—is also a major theme in *The Corrections*. When Chip Lambert is trying to find Christmas presents for his family for example, he raids his own bookshelf, wraps his literary and cultural theory books in alfoil held fast by abortion rights stickers and refuses “to imagine how his nine-year-old nephew Caleb for example, might react to an Oxford annotated edition of *Ivanhoe* whose main qualification as a gift was that it was still in its original shrink wrap” (Franzen 2001, p. 92). The presents Chip receives from his family are, though more carefully chosen, equally useless and, aside from three (a \$100 cheque from his father, a silk shirt from his sister Denise and a bottle of port from his brother) remain on his bedroom floor for weeks. Chip's re-gifting is echoed at the end of the novel when Enid frantically searches a ‘present drawer’ for an extra gift with which to make up the value of Chip's allocation in her Christmas budget. The drawer is filled with detritus: cocktail napkins, travel alarm clocks, steak knives, turtle figurines and “the shoehorn with the telescoping handle” (Franzen 2001, p. 546). Enid eventually settles on a “pewter candle snuffer and the Lucite saltshaker cum pepper grinder” (Franzen 2001, p. 546). The objects are severed from their means of production, from their intended use and from their exchange value (how Enid determines they are worth the \$55 Chip is ‘owed’, the reader is not told).



#### IV.

As capitalism advances to its conclusion, it bursts through the bounds of human understanding, resulting in the apotheosis of its own expanded self (Jameson 1991, pp. 33-6). The apotheosis of capitalism is clearly visible in the societies of Franzen's fiction. This deification is represented, for example, in the religious holiday 'pilgrimages' of two characters—Martin Probst in *The Twenty-Seventh City* and Chip Lambert in *The Corrections*. Chip spends one Christmas in a “twelve-hour-vigil at the Dunkin’ Donuts in Norwalk, Connecticut” hanging around the payphone at which he had asked his student, Melissa, to call him (Franzen 2001, p. 93). The traditional Christmas midnight mass has been replaced by a vigil outside a fast-food joint. Similarly, in *The Twenty-Seventh City*, after refusing an invitation to spend Easter with a church-going childhood friend, Martin Probst escapes his house to dodge any further phone calls from his buddy. It's Maundy Thursday.

He pulled into the Schnucks parking lot, took a cart from the queue outside, and entered the temple of light ... Was it too early to buy the lamb? Not at all! Meat was tenderised by aging, and besides, by Saturday night Schnucks might have run out. He chose two packages of the best. He thought of the irony of slaughtering innocent lambs to celebrate Easter. He remembered when he'd known Jammu so casually he'd been afraid she was a vegetarian. (Franzen 1988, p. 428)

The temple of light for Probst is not Jesus (who described Himself as both the temple and the light), but a supermarket.

The deification of capitalism is evident not only in religious imagery but also in the conspiracy so central to the plot of *The Twenty-Seventh City*. Jameson argues that the flipside of worship of the sublime is the fear and incomprehension that such a sublime engenders. And one of the ways in which fear of the ‘sublime’ of global capital networks is expressed is in the conspiracy theories by which we have tried to grasp its totality (Jameson 1991, p. 34). The conspiracy literature that Jameson describes bears a striking resemblance to Franzen’s “Systems novel”. Moreover, given the relationship between worship and fear of the sublime, it’s noteworthy that the central deception of *The Twenty-Seventh City* conspiracy (a false statement of the city’s liquidity) is committed on Christmas Day and that the climax of the conspiracy takes place over the Easter weekend.

## V

Franzen’s portrayal of Christian holidays offers a powerful critique of the forces set loose in late capitalism and yet, for the most part, imparts a sense of impotence in the face of such forces. Still—despite Franzen’s public lament for the novelist’s ability to effect social change (Franzen 1996) and the critics who argue Franzen’s fiction only reinforces the status quo<sup>6</sup>—there is in the Franzian Christmas of late capitalism, a subtle subversion.

Amid the kitsch and the consumption, there are some truly meant Christmas gifts. Jacques Derrida’s theory of the gift holds that a ‘true gift’ is an impossibility because the moment someone becomes conscious of either giving or receiving, a debt or credit is created and the gift negated. Thus gift giving, according to Derrida, is merely a trade (Derrida 1992, pp. 12-3). But in *The Corrections*, as the diminished Lambert clan meet for

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<sup>6</sup> Ty Hawkins for example, argues that Franzen’s first three novels reinforce a reader’s sense of political paralysis because they present readers “with characters whose lives may look a lot like theirs and who tend towards political paralysis.” (Hawkins 2010, p. 64)

the longed-for final Christmas at home, Denise tries to forgive her brother Chip a \$100,000 debt he owes her. Denise offers this gift—a kind of Franzian Jubilee—at a time when she is out of work and cannot afford it. The episode is an echo of the biblical parable of the old woman who gave her last two coins to a beggar. This biblical story, according to critic John D. Caputo, represents one of the only instances of a true gift because it:

underlines the madness of the giving that does not calculate the interests of the subject, and it is that madness that belongs to the essence (or non-essence) of what Derrida calls the gift. The giving happens not because the widow is trying to discharge her duty and to give herself a good name and a good conscience; and not because it gives her great pleasure to discharge of her overflow, to give herself a good time. She gives without why. (Caputo 1997, p. 177)

Eventually Chip reluctantly accepts the gift, a gift that then assumes the life-changing weight of Jean Valjean's forgiven theft in *Les Misérables*<sup>7</sup> whether or not such an effect was intended. Chip had “the feeling that his debt to Denise, far from being a burden, was his last defence” (Franzen 2001, p. 633).

The other ‘gift’ of *The Corrections* is slightly more complicated. Early in the narrative, the reader learns that much of the Lambert family resentment centres on Alfred's resignation some years earlier when he was just shy of retirement age and a large payout.

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<sup>7</sup> At the beginning of *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean steals silverware from a Bishop who, when Valjean is apprehended for the theft, defends him. The Bishop tells the police to free Valjean because the silver was not stolen, but a gift. By saving Valjean from punishment, the Bishop says, he has bought Valjean's soul for God. (Hugo 1887)

Alfred has never explained his actions. At the end of the novel, on Christmas Eve, Denise finally discovers the truth: Alfred had quit to protect her from the public revelation that she had lost her virginity to one of her father's workmates. At the time Alfred resigned, he can have had no expectation that he would ever be rewarded for his gesture given he refused to provide anyone with an explanation of his actions. From his point of view then, it was a true gift. And when Denise finally learns of the gift, Alfred is so firmly in the grip of dementia that she is unable to tell him she is aware of what he has done. Surely this comes close to satisfying Derrida's idea of the gift as described by Caputo:

the impossible gift then is one in which no one acquires credit and no one contracts a debt. That in turn requires that neither the donor nor the donee would be able to perceive or recognise the gift as a gift, that the gift not appear as a gift. The gift must 'happen' below the plane of phenomenality, too low for the radar of conscious intentionality. (Caputo 1997, p. 163)

These instances of giving, whether or not they successfully demolish Derrida's contradiction, do in some small way subvert the all-encompassing totality of commerce, consumerism and capitalism because they are, at the very least *attempts* at the truly free gift.

## CHAPTER TWO: A CHRISTMAS OF POSTMODERN GHOSTS

“Postmodern fiction wasn’t supposed to be about sympathetic characters. Characters, properly speaking, weren’t even supposed to exist. Characters were feeble, suspect constructs, like the author himself, like the human soul. Nevertheless, to my shame, I seemed to need them.”(Franzen 2002a, p. 103)

### I

In the postmodern world as Franzen describes it, the individual is an endangered species. It can be glimpsed like a “fugitive” (Carey 2003, p. 186) in rare habitats or on certain occasions, occasions which have not yet been fully subsumed in the advancing tide of capitalism. At these times, the past can still be seen alongside the future; the postmodern subject can pose for a holiday snap as it were, side-by-side its earlier incarnations, highlighting its peculiarities and shortcomings. And so, in this chapter I will use Christmas, Easter and Thanksgiving as a frame through which to examine Franzen’s critique of the postmodern subject and its emotional and political (in)capabilities.

However, before we turn to the postmodern conception of the subject, it is worth noting that while this dispersed subject has certainly replaced *something*, it is not the solid, impermeable monad sometimes envisaged. As British theorist Terry Eagleton has noted, it is a fallacy to imagine there was *ever* “some primitive Hobbesian notion of the self as a naked natural atom anterior to its social conditions, linked to other such anti-social atoms by a set of purely contractual relations external to its inner substance” (Eagleton 1996, p. 79). Indeed, Eagleton suggests the idea of ontological individualism was less about

philosophy than the political requirements of the individual. Most liberals could agree that the individual was reasonably porous in terms of its relationship to history and culture, but they shared an understanding that ‘a subject’ existed in so far as it could be afforded political rights or be expected to take political action.

The exponents of the high modernist period did not consider the individual subject an uncontested given any more than their predecessors had. Yet, as Jameson contends, the modernist subject was nonetheless centred, “a monadlike container” (Jameson 1991, p. 15). Moreover, this centred subject was crucial to achieving the great art and unique styles of the modernist period—as well as its anomie. This was the Modernist dilemma: the individuality that allowed for the creation of great artistic work, for distinctive and unique style, demanded a payment in isolation and alienation (Jameson 1991, pp. 11-16).

Expression requires the category of the individual monad, but (there is) a heavy price to be paid for that precondition, dramatizing the unhappy paradox that when you constitute your individual subjectivity as a self-sufficient field and a closed realm, you thereby shut yourself off from everything else (Jameson 1991, p. 15).

As modernism gave way to postmodernism however, the idea of the individual as hermeneutically sealed and isolated gave way to the concept of a dispersed and unstable subject. Jameson locates this development within a broader trend toward superficiality and away from what he calls “depth models” (Jameson 1991, p. 12). He singles out five depth models displaced by contemporary culture, namely: the separation between inside

and outside<sup>8</sup>; the struggle between essence and appearance; the idea of repression or the difference between the latent and the manifest; authenticity versus inauthenticity; and the difference between the signifier and signified (Jameson 1991, p. 12). The common thread running through these models is the assumption that a deeper truth lies beneath the surface or initial appearance. But through progressive waves of structuralism, post-structuralism and deconstruction, the assumption of underlying depth was lost. What began as an effort to point out that language didn't simply reflect truth but could also create or constitute it, ended with a complete severing of ties between language and Truth as well as a big question mark over Truth itself. By the time the postmodern hegemony was fully established, all was surface, superficiality and free-floating meanings unmoored from any underlying depths. There was no deeper or hidden meaning. That this has profound implications for the status of the individual subject is clear. In postmodernity, Jameson argues, the stable, centred Modernist subject is replaced by a subject that is superficial, changeable, generic rather than unique and—in keeping with its lack of psychological depth—devoid of strong feelings. And with that elusive, endangered individual subject in mind, I will now turn to Franzen's novels.

## II.

The depthless, dispersed nature of the postmodern subject is illustrated most graphically in Franzen's first and arguably most postmodern novel<sup>9</sup>, *The Twenty-Seventh City*. The plot, as noted, centres on a conspiracy perpetrated by Police Chief Jammu and her

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<sup>8</sup> Jameson explains this depth model with reference to Edward Munch's painting "The Scream" in which the inside "wordless pain of the monad" is externalized into the soundless cry that causes sound waves across the painted landscape, "the outward dramatization of inward feeling" (Jameson 1991, pp. 11-12).

<sup>9</sup> Franzen himself describes *The Twenty-Seventh City* as a "Systems novel", a term that, as already noted, he often uses to refer to postmodern fiction. (Franzen 2002a, p. 103)

compatriots and which relies upon the ‘breaking’ of the novel’s protagonist Martin Probst. This ‘breaking’ is in itself a reflection on the status of the subject in postmodern culture. And like that postmodern subject, Martin Probst is a nebulous character, difficult to grasp or know. Even Probst, it seems, has trouble getting to know Probst. He decides whether or not he believes in the Resurrection based on “a random sampling of his mind’s constituents” of which 37 per cent give it credence (Franzen 1988, p. 448), he speaks of the disappearance of the personal Probst as the public Probst comes into being (Franzen 1988, p. 217) and of the elusive nature of his own identity. Often, Martin Probst seems more a continuation of Jammu herself—or she of him—than a subject in his own right. Ty Hawkins argues that Probst’s sexual attraction to Jammu produces a Cartesian mind/body split, such that “Probst becomes decentred and seeks to merge with Jammu to regain wholeness” (Hawkins 2010, p. 68). He further argues that this exchangeability is highlighted when Jammu looks in a mirror to find Probst’s white male face peering back at her through an Indian mask (Hawkins 2010, pp. 68-9). Similarly when the two commit adultery (on Easter morning) it is less a case of making love than of mirroring. “She’d lain on top of him, hipbones on hipbones, knees on knees, and he’d held his arms around her narrow body trying less to stop her shaking than to make it match his own” (Franzen 1988, p. 494). The sex over, Probst resolves to end the affair and, in a very postmodern breakdown of the signifying chain, takes comfort from a pain in his shoulder, seeing it as a sign that he was “not ultimately an evil person. Actions emptied of meaning, feelings ceased to matter” (Franzen 1988, p. 496). The exchangeability of the novel’s protagonists is echoed in the similar commutability of two minor characters: Probst’s wife, Barbara, is impersonated by a prostitute, Devi, at the behest of a client that happens to be the real Mrs Probst’s brother-in-law. The real Barbara—whom Probst describes as being three-



dimensional, existing without reference to him or anyone else—is arguably the only pre-postmodern subject in *The Twenty-Seventh City*. But Barbara is murdered as part of the corporate conspiracy in a Franzian take on the death of the subject.

This death of the subject has major implications for the characters of *The Twenty-Seventh City*, which become apparent with the referendum on the merger of St Louis City and its surrounds. The merger, which was the whole point of the conspiracy, fails because not enough people turn out to vote: neither side wins. The American people, Franzen writes, “were outgrowing the age of action” (Franzen 1988, p. 503). His is a dystopian vision of political paralysis similar to the one expressed by Terry Eagleton in his book, *Illusions of Postmodernism*. Eagleton argues that the liberal concept of the centred subject is a necessary precursor to political rights and responsibilities. So it follows then, that when such a subject dissolves there is no longer a centre around which rights and responsibilities coalesce. Eagleton further argues that the liberal postmodern state, which exists to foster a plurality of beliefs, entails a necessary *repression* of political action since successful praxis of say, a Marxist kind, would mean the supremacy of that belief over others.<sup>10</sup> The postmodern view of political action represents a major shift from the socialist or republican humanist one, in which political involvement is seen not just a means of preserving the good life, but—because it is one of the ways in which self-determination is achieved—*part* of the good life. In postmodern society, which has a terror of any one conception of the good life gaining ascendancy, the good life has been confined to the private sphere. The public sphere is reduced to simply securing the conditions in which a good life can be pursued (Eagleton 1996, pp. 84-5).

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<sup>10</sup> He also points out the paradox in this since, by trying to stop the supremacy of any one belief the liberal state is ensuring the supremacy of its *own* belief, which is for a proliferation of beliefs (Eagleton 1996, pp. 83-5).

The implications of the ‘death of the subject’ are not simply political, but psychological too. Jameson argues that the end of depth in the individual subject necessarily entails an end to the isolation and anxiety of the kind experienced by the modernist individual. The fragmentation of the subject into a constantly changing nexus of cultural, biological and consumerist impulses leaves behind the troublesome psychological costs of being an individual and results in what Jameson labels the “waning of affect”. After all, he points out, there can’t very well be a feeling of alienation and pain if there is no self around to do the feeling (Jameson 1991, p. 15). Jameson does not go so far as to say there is no feeling *at all* in the postmodern era, but he does argue that feeling has been displaced by what he labels, after Lyotard, “intensities...free-floating and impersonal” (Jameson 1991, p. 16). He sees the shift reflected in the displacement of the dominant pathologies of the modernist epoch—anxiety and hysteria—by the more contemporary complaints of schizophrenia and drug-abuse.

Jameson’s postmodern pathologies—drugs, a lack of affect and schizoid thought—are recurring themes in *The Corrections*. Early in the novel, Chip Lambert fuels an Easter sex binge with his student, Melissa, by repeatedly dropping “Mexican A”—a dissolution of the self in both senses of the word. But on Easter morning, when the pills have run out, Chip awakes sober and in a panic. That there is panic at all suggests a ‘self’ still exists beneath Chip’s surface—a ‘fugitive’ individual, as Franzen might put it—that significantly, emerges on Easter morning. Enid Lambert later becomes dependent on a drug called Aslan Cruiser, which shares its name with the Christ-like lion in C.S.Lewis’ *Narnia* series and treats a range of psychopathologies, most effectively “‘deep’ or ‘morbid’ shame” (Franzen 2001, p. 366). Enid initially resists taking Aslan, afraid it will change her

personality or erase her individuality. But her doctor allays Enid's fears with a positive spin on the 'waning of affect' that accompanies the death of the subject.

I'm completely sympathetic. We all have irrational attachments to the peculiar chemical coordinates of our character. It's a version of the fear of death right? I don't know what it will be like to not be me anymore. But guess what? If "I'm" not around to tell the difference, what do "I" really care? Being dead's only a problem if you know you're dead. (Franzen 2001, p. 366)

In the end however, an affectless existence is not enough for Enid. On Christmas Eve, when she is offered a stash of pills that she has had (illegally) imported from Mexico, Enid decides to go clean, declaring she wants reality or nothing at all. Here is both a rejection of affectlessness and a clinging to the uniqueness and specificity of the autonomous subject. Enid rejects the postmodern view of the subject as generic and replaceable. And she does it at a time when her specificity is most apparent: Christmas.

Franzen too, rejects the idea of the diffuse, disintegrated, unspecific self.

### III.

Chip Lambert, that desperate hawker of literary theorists, that capitulator to capitalism, articulates the philosophy of the deconstructed self perhaps better than any of Franzen's characters. In Chip's postmodern view of the individual, the impulse of love and the family relationship is reduced to a Darwinian, animal urge, an accident of chemical coordinates. In an email to his sister, Denise, Chip writes:

It's not clear to me why I'm required to come to St. Jude on some specific date. If Mom and Dad were my children, whom I'd created out of nothing, without asking their permission, I could understand being responsible for them. Parents have an overwhelming Darwinian hardwired genetic stake in their children's welfare. But children, it seems to me, have no corresponding debt to their parents.

Basically, I have very little to say to these people. And I don't think they want to hear what I have to say. (Franzen 2001, pp. 500-1)

And yet, as Chip's adolescent jibe suggests, postmodern theory doesn't tell the whole story. There *is* something else between Chip and "these people", why else would the little he does have to say promise to evoke such strong emotions? But Chip cannot comprehend his family's desperation to have him home for Christmas, nor his demented father's wish to see him, Chip, *specifically*. Chip had "lost track of himself. How strange, then, that the old man who opened the front door at nine-thirty in St. Jude the next morning seemed to know exactly who he was" (Franzen 2001, p. 620). It is significant that Alfred is the conduit through which Chip finally recognises his value as an individual, because it is Alfred who, in his mental and physical unravelling, most clearly articulates the horror of the postmodern destruction of the unique, specific individual. In one scene for example, as Alfred attempts to fix a "90 per cent serviceable string of (Christmas) lights" (Franzen 2001, p. 432), he becomes increasingly desperate as he realises "modernity" expects him just to trash the broken string and buy a new one.

“He was an individual from an age of individuals” and the string is “like him, an individual thing ...(and) to throw it away was to deny its value and by extension the value of individuals generally.” (Franzen 2001, p. 432)

The scene has added pathos because Alfred is on the brink of complete dementia—his lights are metaphorically going out. The existential questions raised by this episode are sharply reminiscent of similar ones raised by Franzen himself in an essay about his own father’s disappearance into dementia (Franzen 2002b) and in which he laments:

our current cultural susceptibility to the charms of materialism—our increasing willingness to see psychology as chemical, identity as genetic, and behaviour as the product of bygone exigencies of human evolution (Franzen 2002b, p. 33).

One of the most peculiar ways in which Alfred’s mental disintegration manifests is in the incessant scatological hallucinations that accompany it. Alfred Lambert is plagued by sentient, but insensitive, excrement. The turds that torment him are disrespectful, libertarian and out for themselves. When Alfred begs a turd not to smear his clothes for example, it scoffs at the idea of hopping in a toilet to spare somebody else’s feelings. “I’m opposed to all strictures. If you feel it, let it rip” (Franzen 2001, p. 328), it says, before proceeding to quote the Declaration of the “You Nighted” (perhaps to be read as “You, knighted?”) States in defence of its right to do what it pleases.

At the most basic level, Alfred’s scatological troubles mirror his psychological disintegration. But there may be more to it. There is a long history of the scatological in literature and philosophy ranging from Freudian theories linking constipation and

antisocial tendencies (Dainotto 1993) to Lacanian representations of shit as a symbol of repression. The academic Roberto Maria Dainotto sees evidence of an “excremental sublime” in postmodern literature. Dainotto draws on Longinus’ theory that the truly sublime in art elevates those who behold it such that “uplifted with a sense of proud possession, we are filled with joyful pride as if we ourselves had produced the very thing we heard” (Longinus 3rd C. AD, p. 153). Dainotto argues that “*excremental* sublimity” (my italics) involves a narrative process of ingesting the “old stories, given forms and structures” (Dainotto 1993 paragraph 24) before digesting and transforming them and expelling the results. As a result of this digestive process, the postmodern artist gains the sense of proud possession of which Longinus speaks. Dainotto writes:

For the voracious postmodern individual, blockage is the real threat, and survival coincides with some sort of “digestive capability”—the power to actively transform authorities and traditions into fecal signs, into wastes from which the subject has to separate in order to constitute itself as a subject. (Dainotto 1993 paragraph 22)

The “excremental sublime” Dainotto depicts is the ironic inversion of Longinus’ vision of a mystical, transcendent Art. It is a “metaphoric inversion from art to anti-art, from aesthetics to anti-aesthetics, from the ‘beautiful’ to the sublime ‘camp vision’.” (Dainotto 1993 paragraph 35).

Franzen himself likens some postmodern creation to the excremental, but his take is not as positive as Dainotto’s. “Difficult fiction of the kind epitomised by Gaddis seems to me more closely associated with the lower end of the digestive tract,” he writes,

characterising some of Gaddis' work as "impacted excreta" and "constipated to the point of being unreadable" (Franzen 2002a, p. 109). At the very least then, it is possible to read Franzen's scatological imagery as a comment on the stasis or constipation of postmodern culture.

Scatological imagery abounds in Franzen's fiction. Characters are constipated, offended by poo jokes, assaulted by broken sewerage systems. Chip Lambert describes the relief of having dealt with the problem of Christmas presents by gifting his old books on literary theory as like "having taken an enormous dump" (Franzen 2001, p. 93). *Freedom's* Patty Berglund is subjected to a Christmas of "bizarro sexual and scatological repartee" (Franzen 2010, p. 79) between her father and middle sister, the very postmodern Abigail, while yearning for the homey, traditional Christmas that her soon-to-be-husband, Walter, describes at his home. Later in *Freedom* a middle-aged Abigail returns to her flat on Thanksgiving to find the sewage system broken. Later still, Patty's son Joey—after refusing to give in to his "hidden self" (Franzen 2010, p. 282), which yearns for a last Christmas in the family home before it is sold—wakes up in Abigail's flat (which he is houseminding) to find the bathroom swimming in raw sewerage. There is a touch of Dainotto's excremental sublime—the consumption, digestion and production of the postmodern—in the shit associated with Joey and Abigail. They are the characters in *Freedom* that most represent the consumption, historicity and self-making of the postmodern individual and yet the results in each case are far from sublime. The imagery associated with Chip however, is clearly about the constipation of postmodern thought and it is significant that he feels unblocked (like he's "taken an enormous dump" (Franzen 2001, p. 93)) following the sale of his books on postmodern theory. Alfred's blockage too, is linked with mental constipation. The pipeline drug that offers (ultimately false) hope for

curing his Alzheimer's for example, is called Corecktail in a clear reference to the scatologically-named Gaddis character, Recktail Brown, whom Franzen also mentions in his discussion of Gaddis' blocked writing. Meanwhile, Dainotto's theory of the excremental sublime might allow us to interpret Alfred's *actual* turds as the libertarian, postmodern culture that is partly the product of the ingested individualism of Alfred's own generation. But the turds are not transcendent or triumphant. When, on Christmas Eve, carollers arrive at the Lambert's front door, Denise goes to find Alfred only to discover him struggling with a plastic enema kit. Deciding at first to leave her father in private, Denise then thinks better of the idea and kneels down amid the "shit smells and piss smells" (Franzen 2001, p. 612) in order to help her father perform his enema. The out-for-itself postmodern turd is overcome in a victory for the communitarian over the libertarian; the postmodern blockage is cleared.

#### IV.

The postmodern subject is a strange creature. A decentred, dissipated being, it is no longer unique as in the modernist conception, nor even terribly autonomous as in the liberal tradition. And yet, paradoxically, it is characterised by a rampant new narcissism. Terry Eagleton draws these apparently divergent characteristics together through, coincidentally, freedom.

Eagleton argues that because postmodernism is nervous of the old liberal conception of freedom as self-determination, it is forced to conceive of liberty in the negative, as "doing your own thing free of external restraint" (Eagleton 1996, p. 87). The liberal subject respected the autonomy of others, since not to do so would entail a loss of respect for its own autonomy. But when, as in postmodernism, freedom is conceived of as



a lack of restraint on the individual, other subjects are seen as potential obstacles to such freedom rather than its enablers. Complete freedom in this sense is achieved only when there are no other autonomous subjects to restrain you, allowing the self to burst “through the juridico-political frame which once contained it” (Eagleton 1996, p. 87). As Eagleton points out, it’s something of a hollow victory since there is also no subject left to enjoy this new freedom.

That this paradox even exists suggests that the dissolved subject exists in theory only, a point Eagleton highlights when he argues that a true divestiture of the ego (rather than a simply theoretical one) would actually unleash “a great power for political good” (Eagleton 1996, p. 91). He frames this positive loss of the self not through the depthless plurality of postmodernism but through the spiritual idea of kenosis, of pouring oneself out for others, the supreme example of which was Jesus Christ on the cross. Seen this way, backwards as it were, the postmodern death of the subject is no death at all, but rather the death of a subject ruled by any particular truth or with any sense of its own identity. And it is this lack of identity that leads to narcissism: an inability to go beyond the self, to transcend the self-consciousness and self-searching of a subject trying to become concrete.

This uneasy mix of narcissism and lack of identity, of dissolved self and self-centredness is embodied in *Freedom’s* Joey Berglund. The son of baby boomers who have thrown off the strictures of the Western patriarchal tradition, Joey is unburdened by guilt—or at least feels he ought to be. He is unfaithful to fiancé Connie, swallowing his own engagement ring in order to hide it from the woman he’s trying to seduce (later, in another scatological twist, he regrets the move and waits, panicked, for the ring to emerge at the other end of the digestive process). He works in the illegal arms trade, samples

Judaism and eschews family Christmases because he is loath to be beholden to anyone, even his own hidden self. It's hard to think of a more negative conception of freedom. At an Easter lunch, Joey enunciates this negative conception when he muses that freedom is "the right to think whatever you want" (Franzen 2010, p. 262). It's a similar notion to the one espoused by Joey's paternal grandfather, Einer, who, in increasingly irate Christmas chain letters, rages against big government, conspiracies and other perceived incursions on his liberty. As Einer's son Walter observes, "the personality that is attracted to the idea of absolute freedom is the type of person who, if the dream ever sours, is liable to give in to misanthropy and rage" (Franzen 2010, p. 445).

The postmodern coupling of uncertain identity with extreme self-centredness is also explored through the character of Jonah Lambert in *The Corrections*. The youngest of the Lambert clan, Jonah transforms over the course of the novel from a creature of "Narnian dearness" (Franzen 2001, p. 161) and unselfconsciousness—the only character in which action and thought are one—to a boy under "the tyranny of cool" (Franzen 2001, p. 561). Jonah's individuality and authenticity are gradually effaced until, by the end of the narrative, he is a copy of his hip older brothers. His 'disappearance' parallels his gradual abandonment of plans to visit his grandmother (Enid) for Christmas in favour of staying home with his brothers and playing *The God Project II*, a computer game in which the user creates their own world. Paradoxically, the end of Jonah's uniqueness and sincerity comes at a stroke with a freedom untrammelled by others; his mother's insistence that where he spends Christmas is about what *he* wants. "Your personal choice is what matters here," (Franzen 2001, p. 562) she says, marking a hollow victory of the kind described by Eagleton. Jonah becomes free at the moment 'he' disappears. The last

time the reader sees Jonah is, appropriately, as he's designing his own world in which there will be no other autonomous subjects to restrain him.

## V.

In the postmodern view, as Franzen noted in his essay on William Gaddis, the character or subject is a ghost, a dubious construct, not “even supposed to exist” (Franzen 2002a, p. 103). And yet, the postmodern individual is highly visible in Franzen's fiction, along with all its peculiar attributes—affectlessness, drug dependence, constipation, amorphousness and narcissism. But Franzen's critique of the postmodern subject makes it clear that he rejects this view of the individual, insisting instead on a conception of the individual as specific, unique, more than mere biology or consumer choice.

The will to record indelibly, to set down stories in permanent words, seems to me akin to the conviction that we are larger than our biologies. I wonder if our current cultural susceptibility to the charms of materialism—our increasing willingness to see psychology as chemical, identity as genetic, and behaviour as the product of bygone exigencies of human evolution—isn't intimately related to the postmodern resurgence of the oral and the eclipse of the written: our incessant telephoning, our ephemeral emailing, our steadfast devotion to the flickering tube (Franzen 2002b, p. 33).

Franzen sees it as literature's task to protect the endangered, “fugitive” (Carey 2003, p. 186) individual from the onslaught of advanced capitalism and postmodernism. Just how he characterises this task is a matter to which I now turn.

### CHAPTER THREE: A POST-POSTMODERN CHRISTMAS.

“I love humanity, it’s people I can’t stand.” Linus Van Pelt (*Peanuts* character)

“When you stay in your room and rage or sneer or shrug your shoulders, as I did for many years, the world and its problems are impossibly daunting. But when you go out and put yourself in real relation to real people, or even just real animals, there’s a very real danger that you might love some of them. And who knows what might happen to you then?” (Franzen 2011b)

#### I

Mention of ‘The *Harper’s* Essay’<sup>11</sup> has become something of a shibboleth in reviews and critiques of Franzen’s work. Reviewers typically note Franzen’s fears, stated in the essay, over the future of the social novel by which he appears to mean a work that links the personal with the wider culture, which offers social reportage as well as character development, that reflects and addresses the culture, that is instructive or ‘corrective’.<sup>12</sup> Most reviewers then go on to discuss whether the Franzian work in question is a successful social novel or not and was ever meant to be anyway. (This last question is

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<sup>11</sup> What’s widely referred to as Franzen’s “*Harper’s* Essay” was first published in 1996 as “Perchance to Dream” in *Harper’s* magazine. Franzen subsequently revised the essay, renamed it “Why Bother?” and included it in his 2002 collection *How to be Alone*. It is the 2002 version to which this thesis refers.

<sup>12</sup> While I am aware there are links between the idea of the social novel and Jean-Paul Sartre’s “litterature engagée”, the demand that literature go beyond “art for art’s sake”, there is not scope within the current thesis to explore this link further.

seemingly a response to Franzen's suggestion in the essay that he will abandon trying to correct the culture and concentrate on writing about the people and things he cares about. Unfortunately, as critic James Wood has pointed out, Franzen's essay is incoherent in places and it's never entirely clear whether he really *is* giving up or not (Wood 2004, pp. 185-7)). What is less often noted about the *Harper's* Essay is Franzen's palpable dissatisfaction with the existing tools of cultural criticism (he's done the postmodern thing, he says, and it didn't *work*) and his obvious desire to return to the novelist's traditional concerns in a cultural context that makes such concerns all but invisible. Referencing Flannery O'Connor, Franzen identifies these concerns as "mystery (how human beings avoid or confront the meaning of existence) and manners (the nuts and bolts of how human beings behave)" (Franzen 1996, p. 68). Thus, I believe, The *Harper's* Essay is not simply a lament for the social novel but evidence of the longing that will later give birth to the new literary form known as post-postmodernism, a form that becomes increasingly evident in Franzen's fiction.

In this chapter, I will argue that over time Franzen's novels become less identifiable as straight cultural critiques in a postmodern mould and increasingly evince a post-postmodern understanding of the world and art's place within it. I will, as in previous chapters, frame my argument by analysing Franzen's use of the Christian holidays. I will also consider to what extent Franzen's fears for the future of the novel coalesce with the broader concerns of post-postmodernism. And finally, I will ask whether or not Franzen's post-postmodernist writing more successfully engages with the culture than did his earlier explicit attempts at the social novel, whether, in fact, in post-postmodernism Franzen has found the answer to his concerns about the future of the novel.

## II

A good starting point from which to gain an understanding of both Franzen's changing literary aims and the emergence of post-postmodernism more generally is with a parable about the author's beloved birds.

Once upon a time, whenever Franzen considered large-scale environmental problems such as destruction of the world's oceans or deforestation or overpopulation, he found himself becoming consumed by rage and helplessness to such an extent that he eventually abandoned environmentalism (Franzen 2011b). Some time later, Franzen took up bird watching, though "not without significant resistance, because it's very uncool to be a birdwatcher, because anything that betrays real passion is by definition uncool" (Franzen 2011b). And as Franzen spent more time observing individual birds rather than concentrating on correcting the big environment-wide issues, he began to regain a sense of agency (Franzen 2011b).

Franzen's revelatory experience of birdwatching follows a thematically similar trajectory to his *Harper's* Essay account of his battle with a depression both clinical and literary, a condition that masqueraded as a "realism regarding the rottenness of the world in general and the rottenness of your life in particular" (Franzen 1996, p. 87). Franzen recounts how he finally discovered that the realism was simply a mask for "depression's actual essence, which is an overwhelming estrangement from humanity" (Franzen, 1996, p.87). He eventually stops trying to correct the rottenness of contemporary society in favour of writing about the people and locales he cares about. He trades "depressive realism" (Franzen 1996, p. 73) for "tragic realism" (Franzen 1996), which is less concerned with correction than with understanding and reconnection.

Franzen's fears about the impotence of traditional critical tools in addressing the problems of contemporary culture, his desire to reconnect with the individuals around him and his concerns about the "uncoolness" of genuine passion are all concerns that he shares with the genre of post-postmodernism.

It's widely accepted that post-postmodernism was ushered in with a 1990 essay about television written by the late David Foster Wallace. In *E Unibus Pluram*, Foster Wallace argued that contemporary culture had become saturated with cynicism and self-consciousness. The critical tools of postmodernism like irony and self-reference, which were once used to subvert the dominant culture as represented on television, had become an integral part of that culture. Irony and satire had been absorbed to such an extent that these once subversive tools were now not just useless but actually served to *perpetuate* the hegemony of consumer capitalism. TV producers scripted self-mocking irony and metafictional jokes to rout critical attacks and beat their critics to the punch. More damaging still, by saturating their sitcoms and talk shows with ironic put-downs and piss-take, cultural producers trained their audience to fear, above all else, being exposed as naïve or "betraying passé expressions of value, emotion or vulnerability" (Wallace 1990, p. 63). As fear grew, there was a concomitant change in the perception of art's role "from being a creative instantiation of real values to a creative rejection of bogus values" (Wallace 1990, p. 59), a perception that bled across to the literary establishment. But once all the bogus values had been rejected, the culture of 'corrective' satire discouraged anyone from proposing alternative values for fear of being ridiculed. As Franzen argued "the essence of postmodernism is an adolescent fear of getting taken in, an adolescent conviction that all systems are phony" (Franzen 2002a, p. 111). It's a blockage not unlike the constipation that repeatedly appears in his fiction. And it's a situation envisaged by

Jameson in which the capitalist/postmodern system subsumes everything into itself, including rebellion such that, as Franzen put it, “if you get this particular kind of Nike sneakers ... It’s going to make you a rebel ... You’re the scary rebel individual American if you listen to this particular flavour of the month hip hop record” (Carey 2003, p. 186, quoting Franzen). What was left, Foster Wallace argued, was a culture of despair (Wallace 1990). In this milieu, he said:

The next real literary ‘rebels’ might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who somehow back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single entendre principles. Who treat plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. (Wallace 1990 p.81)

The critic and academic Robert McLaughlin describes post-postmodernism as a new literary “mission” broadly following Wallace’s call to ‘anti-rebellion’ rebellion. McLaughlin argues that the new movement was a reaction to the “dead end” of postmodernism’s “detachment from the social world and immersion in a world of non-referential language, its tendency ... to disappear up its own asshole” (McLaughlin 2004, p. 55). Post-postmodernism, he says, was inspired by a desire to “re-energise literature’s social mission ... to have an impact on actual people and the actual social institutions in which they live their lives” (McLaughlin 2004, p. 55). In this, then, it resembles the desire to engage with the culture expressed by Franzen in the *Harper’s* Essay.

In keeping with this desire for reconnection and renewed social mission, post-postmodernist writers have turned away from the questions of representation that so



captivated postmodernists, and trained their eye back on the objects and people being represented (McLaughlin 2004). Such a mission however, requires certain foundations such as a belief in the specificity of the individual or a belief in the existence of some kind of mind-independent reality. This is a major break from theory's focus on the constructed elements of signs and language and its emphasis on subjectivity as a determiner of world views; a focus that had led to a situation in which it was "unfashionable" to be certain of anything (Eagleton 2003, p. 105). A major flaw in this situation, Eagleton argues, was that it left unaddressed many of the 'big' questions of the human condition such as death, love and biology (Eagleton 2003, p. 101), questions that Foster Wallace might have called "plain old untrendy human troubles" (Wallace 1990, p. 81). It's a flaw the post-postmodernists seem keen to remedy. The other problem with a lack of certainty, Eagleton argues, is practical. An absence of objective reality or absolute truth leads eventually to political exploitation or neglect. "If true (sic) loses its force, then political radicals can stop talking as though it is unequivocally true that women are oppressed or that the planet is being gradually poisoned by corporate greed" (Eagleton 2003, p. 109). Objectivity is a question of ethics; there must be some objective measures by which we can determine whether or not a person is flourishing as a human being. By way of example, Eagleton points out we would probably *not* believe a slave that told us he was happy as a slave (though this is precisely what colonialists have insisted about the colonised for centuries). Thus, objectivity "is a matter of there being ways of refuting those who insist that all is well as long as we are feeling fine" (Eagleton 2003, p. 131). Likewise, objective self-knowledge "is the precondition of all successful living" (Eagleton 2003, p. 137). Finally, denying the existence of an objective reality leads to narcissism because it involves an infantile refusal to accept that the world is an object independent of

oneself (Eagleton 2003, p. 138).

Post-postmodernism re-asserts the possibility of metanarratives, of shared stories rather than his or her stories, re-asserts the possibility of shared values and a shared *human* condition (as opposed to say, a white, heterosexual male or gay Mexican female condition)<sup>13</sup>. However, post-postmodernism does not simply retreat into a sort of pre-modernist, humanist bubble where reality is uncontested and truth certain; it moves forward with its postmodern awareness intact. Indeed, McLaughlin argues, the post-postmodernists use this awareness—of the contested and constitutive nature of language and the problems of representation—to fight the reification of cynicism, disconnect and atomised privacy and to “make us newly aware of the reality that has been made for us and to remind us—because we live in a culture where we’re encouraged to forget—that other realities are possible” (McLaughlin 2004, p. 12).

A further precondition for the renewed social engagement that post-postmodernists so desire is a sincerity at odds with the hegemonic culture of satire highlighted by Foster Wallace. Indeed, in his essay “The New Sincerity”, Adam Kelly argues that post-postmodernism evinces a desire for sincerity “not seen since Modernism ... shifted the ground” from sincerity to authenticity (Kelly 2010, p. 2159/4038). Drawing on work by Lionel Trilling, Kelly writes that sincerity, because it emphasises the value of being true to oneself only as a necessary precondition to being honest with others, has been overtaken by the concept of *authenticity* which values being true to one’s self as an ends in itself (Kelly 2010). Post-postmodernism, Kelly argues, displays a desire

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<sup>13</sup> Franzen argues that while “it’s fashionable” to argue against a shared American identity, it’s likely that “a black lesbian New Yorker and a Southern Baptist Georgian” have many things in common including threatened jobs, dreams of fame, a prescription for an anti-depressant and “a guilty crush on Uma Thurman” (Franzen 1996, p. 69).

to return to sincerity, to true connection with others, despite an understanding of the difficulty if not impossibility of the task. Sincerity has always been a contradictory concept, Kelly notes; the very fact we need such a word implies a split between inner thought and the communication of that thought, which in turn implies true sincerity is impossible. And developments since sincerity was last in vogue—an awareness of the problems of representation, the rise of advertising and the attendant disjuncture between meaning and avowal as well as the ubiquity of irony—have made the task even more Herculean. In this, Kelly argues, sincerity has the inner structure of Derrida’s gift: the anticipation of how it will be received destroys the possibility of it. And yet, it is this very *impossibility*, which is its precondition. Just as Derrida’s gift has to be unintentional in order to be true, Kelly’s sincerity has to be unintended in order to be genuine. Despite this impossibility, post-postmodernists plough on, eschewing the “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Kelly 2010, p. 2230/4038 / Kelly citing Paul Ricoeur) to attempt person-to-person communication, true sincerity. What further marks out the New Sincerity from the old, Kelly posits, is that it attempts sincerity while continually and overtly noting the author’s own “anticipatory logic”<sup>14</sup> (Kelly 2010, p. 2197/4038), the impossibility of guaranteeing that sincerity has ever been achieved. In this sense then, it is arguably more sincere than the old version.

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<sup>14</sup> Kelly argues that the hyper self-awareness of the television age, combined with the representational problems that are the legacy of postmodernism, has led to a situation in which we are always anticipating how what we are going to say or do will be received, such that we run the risk of this “anticipatory logic” becoming the origin of our communications and actions rather than the inner thought.

### III

As noted, a common feature of post-postmodern work is, if not a return to the metanarratives jettisoned by cultural theory, then a palpable *desire* for such a return. In Franzen's novels too, the characters struggle with the slippery question of reality and truth in postmodern times. Wordplay, arguments over the truth of differing versions of events, and scenes rich with imagery and allegory emphasise the difficulties of deciphering an objective reality or absolute truth and express yearnings for such a thing as a shared external world.

In Franzen's first novel, *The Twenty-Seventh City*, reality, truth and identity are still firmly in the grip of postmodern theory. Characters assume one another's identities, see one another's reflections instead of their own and think one another's thoughts. Appearances are not as they seem. The only character—Barbara Probst—who is presented as solidly existing, without reference to anything else, is killed. Truth and objectivity are elusive. One of the novel's characters describes the nuclear age as “the objectification of the terror of total subjectivity” (Franzen 1988, p. 272) and it's a description that could apply just as well to the world of *The Twenty-Seventh City*. Around Easter, Martin Probst muses about the potential veracity of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and decides in the negative based, not on truth or evidence, but on “a random sampling of his mind's constituents” (Franzen 1988, p. 448). Democracy or majority opinion (of brain cells) is the final arbiter of truth. Reality is difficult to pin down amidst the simulacra. Probst gives Chief Jammu a “real imitation milk chocolate” Easter egg (Franzen 1988, p. 452). People mistake Devi for Barbara. And Jammu tells a co-conspirator that she has failed to seduce Probst as planned, instructing him to: “forget the subjective correlative” (Franzen 1988, p. 453). This is a twist on T. S. Eliot's theory of the

“objective correlative”, which holds that artists can evoke an emotion or feeling through presenting “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion” (Eliot 1919, p. 313, Eliot's emphasis). Eliot's theory thus assumes a shared understanding of signs as well as a concurrence between intention and outward dramatization of that intention. Franzen's “subjective correlative” then, would suggest that actions and objects are indecipherable, useless as signifiers. Accordingly, Jammu is lying about her failure with Probst; she *has* in fact seduced him and meanwhile the two subjectivities, Jammu and Probst, have become correlated, *co*-related, mixed. The actions and inner thoughts of both Probst and Jammu are confused and unknowable, completely useless as signs to how they are feeling (Franzen 1988, pp. 453-4).

Reality and truth remain slippery in *The Corrections*, but where subjectivity was total in *The Twenty-Seventh City*, the characters of *The Corrections* struggle towards truth or at the least a correct version of events, revealing an assumption that somewhere there is such a thing as objective reality, however elusive. Thus Gary Lambert gets “a sense that he survived from day to day by distracting himself from underground truths that day by day grew more compelling and decisive. The truth that he was going to die. That heaping your tomb with treasure wouldn't save you” (Franzen 2001, p. 157). And while relativist Gary has an almost biblical revelation of Absolute Truth, his father, Alfred, whose certainty about reality is pre-Saussurean, is forced to acknowledge the truth that his ‘reality’ is constructed. Alfred had a “suspicion that everything was relative. That the ‘real’ and the ‘authentic’ might not be simply doomed, but fictive to begin with” (Franzen 2001, p. 272). Enid too, comes by the end of the book to acknowledge that her view of reality has been based on a simulacrum. Her journey to this point is richly paved with metaphor. For example, Denise hides her mother's illegally imported stash of the “shame-blocking”

drug Aslan in the Christmas Eve pocket of Enid's beloved Advent Calendar. This is the pocket that holds the Christ child ornament that for Enid represents not Jesus but the embellished memory of her own babies and of 'sweet-smelling' babies more generally. Thus a symbol of delusion (the ornament) is replaced by a means of delusion (the drugs). Enid's memory of Christmases past and her hopes for Christmas future are based not on objective reality but on the simulacrum of a happy family and on pharmaceutical assistance respectively. However, Enid eventually decides to forgo the Aslan pills saying, "I want the real thing or I don't want anything". But when Denise asks her what the real thing is, Enid reveals she still hasn't accepted objective reality. "I want us all together for one last Christmas" (Franzen 2001, p. 609), she says; yet Enid knows her grandsons aren't coming, her youngest son probably won't make it and her husband is descending into dementia. It is only on Christmas morning, when Alfred is completely unmoored from reality and Gary has just left in a huff, that Enid admits the truth, telling her children: "this wasn't the Christmas I'd hoped for. Suddenly dad can't do a thing. Not one single thing" (Franzen 2001, p. 630). What Franzen calls "therapeutic optimism" (Franzen 1996), by which he means our culture's insistence that everything is 'correctable'—buy this gadget, take that pill, remember 'you' don't even exist anyway—is traded for tragic realism.

If Enid is finally forced to accept that her reality has been based on a false ideal, Chip is forced to see that there are some objective realities after all. Thus when he arrives home on Christmas morning, he sees the St Judean landscape as at first "precarious" like a mirage. But the landscape and his home, indeed "his continent", solidify and become increasingly real. Chip, who fears going home for Christmas for the same reason he fears reading a novel, is "afraid to enter" his home (Franzen 2001, p. 620). Peering through the

front door to his childhood home, he sees an “enchanted interior ... dense with objects and smells and colors, humidity, large personalities” (Franzen 2001, p. 620). As discussed earlier in this thesis, the meaning of Chip’s fear can be found in Franzen’s own feelings about reading (Franzen 1995, 1996). Reading, Christian holidays and childhood homes all, for Franzen, represent a reality independent from the subjective mind and all demand individual subjects that are solid in their specificity, neither free-floating, nor merely biological, nor a nexus of consumer choices. They are also zones that have retained a degree of immunity to the “therapeutic optimism” of postmodernity, an optimism which aims to erase the properly unsolvable questions of the human condition: those questions of mystery and manners (Franzen 1996). As such they are oppositional, zones of rebellion against the prevailing culture. Chip apprehends, however dimly, that when he steps into any of these pre-postmodernist milieus his personhood will become fixed, with all the loss of freedom that entails.

While *The Corrections* moves past deconstruction in its assertion of greater truths or solid realities, reality is still very much a contested concept. In the end, objective reality is accepted as Eagleton might view it: a necessary precondition for successful living. That is, without some acceptance of the idea of objective reality there is no possibility of caring for another person. The other person is “objectivity in action” since he or she is independent from our subjective conception of reality (Eagleton 2003, p. 138). Viewed through this frame, many of the Lambert family’s struggles can be seen as the practical social outcome of postmodernism’s insistence on a multiplicity of perspectives. For example, Gary and Caroline’s battle over what actually happened at a previous (disastrous) family Christmas is part of a larger war over reality that threatens to destroy their marriage. Gary believes Caroline is selfish, lying to him and turning their children against him; Caroline believes

Gary is clinically depressed, lying to himself and that his mother is crazy. Both spend much of the book trying to force the other to cede to their own view of reality. Eventually, to save the marriage, Gary concedes to Caroline's argument that he is depressed. Gary doesn't think that Caroline is the holder of absolute truth, but he does accept that he is not the final arbiter of reality either; that reality is not, finally, subjective.

In Franzen's most recent novel, *Freedom*, the battle over reality has become much more conventional. As reviewer Charles Baxter writes, there is "reality-as-given" in spades (Baxter 2010). Franzen seems more confident about asserting the existence of mind-independent reality and now turns his attention more fully to the moral and social implications of denying its existence. Objective reality is presented as a necessary precondition for successful and ethical living, its absence as a dangerous vacuum. As such, the novel's view of reality links with the title and theme of the book, *Freedom*. Throughout, Franzen examines whether freedom conceived in negative terms—as a lack of restrictions like objective reality, morality, social responsibility or the demands of other people's needs—is indeed liberating. Freedom conceived in this way—and its destructive potential—is personified in the character of Joey Berglund. Coming of age as part of the postmodern generation of free-floating identity and absent authority, Joey follows no moral code except for a kind of Darwinian imperative to get the best he can out of all situations whether romantic, economic or familial. He deceives his long-term girlfriend Connie in order to pursue an affair with the beautiful but amoral Jenna and makes money selling dodgy truck parts to the American military. He lies to avoid spending Christmas, Easter and Thanksgiving with his family and with Connie, thus evading those times in which he will be "specific" (Carey 2003), when he will be restricted by an identity that is not simply based on his own choices. But even in his freedom, Joey spends much of



the time “feeling doomed” (Franzen 2010, p. 384) and longing for the kind of strictures that Eagleton associates with positive freedom, i.e.: respect for the autonomy of others and for moral codes. Joey sees his mother’s lack of religion, for example, as evidence of her “competitive Copernican wish to be the sun around which all things revolved” (Franzen 2010, p. 272) and finds his father’s comparably rigid morals attractive. Joey’s freedom then, is reminiscent of the negative freedom that Eagleton describes as “doing your own thing free of external restraint” (Eagleton 1996, p. 87). Or of the freedom described by Foster Wallace in *E Unibus Pluram*, “when all experience can be deconstructed and reconfigured, there become simply too many choices. And in the absence of any credible, non-commercial guides for living, the freedom to choose is about as ‘liberating’ as a bad acid trip” (Wallace 1990, p. 79).

Truth is depicted in *Freedom* as a precondition for ethical living; its absence is seen as a dangerous vacuum in which the powerful can impose their viewpoints on the less powerful. Over Thanksgiving lunch at Jenna’s house, Joey has a discussion with Jenna’s father that sounds similar warning bells to Eagleton’s arguments about the ethical implications of an absence of objective reality or truth. Responding to a “mild challenge” about Iraq’s nuclear capabilities, Jenna’s father argues that “we” need to be comfortable stretching some facts in the pursuit of “a greater truth”. But that greater truth turns out to be vested interest.

“How do you know it’s the truth?” (Joey) called out.

“We never know for certain,” Jenna’s father said. “...But ... our understanding of the world, based on decades of careful empirical study by the very best minds, is in striking accordance with the inductive principle

of universal human freedom ... I'm guessing you've already had the experience of being frustrated with people who aren't as bright as you are. People who are not only unable but *unwilling* to admit certain truths whose logic is self-evident to you. Who don't even seem to *care* that their logic is bad."

"But that's because they're free," Joey said. "Isn't that what freedom is for? The right to think whatever you want? I mean, I admit, it's a pain in the ass sometimes."

Around the table, people chuckled at this.

"That's exactly right," Jenna's father said. "Freedom is a pain in the ass. And that's precisely why it's imperative that we ... get a nation of free people to let go of their bad logic and sign on with better logic, by whatever means are necessary." (Franzen 2010, pp. 267-8)

Freedom, it turns out, is the opposite of liberation: it's the absence of the means of self-determination. At the end of the novel, Joey reimagines freedom from a more post-postmodern viewpoint. He accepts certain strictures of identity and responsibility, of marriage and family, and trades in his job hawking off rusty trucks for one importing shade-grown coffee.

#### IV

One of the most obvious ways in which Franzen's later novels evince a post-postmodern sensibility is in the disappearance of the harshly satiric tone of his earlier works and the appearance of a softer, laughing-with-you-not-at-you style of comic writing. In *The*

*Irresponsible Self*, James Wood points out that as Franzen moves away from writing the “social novel” and concentrates on the authentic depiction of character, his fiction becomes less judgmental in tone and more empathetic. What Wood elsewhere calls “the comedy of correction” gives way to a “comedy of forgiveness” (Wood 2004, p. 9). Or as Franzen might put it, the faultfinding of depressive realism gives way to the empathy of tragic realism.

In *The Twenty-Seventh City*, Franzen is in full satiric swing. He uses anthropological tropes to satirize Yuletide activities, as in this passage about St Louis: “more than half the human bodies have alcohol in their bloodstream. The city/county average body temperature is 98.63F. Lipid counts are seasonably high. Three babies have been born in the last hour (two of them will be named Noel) and five adults have died, three of natural causes” (Franzen 1988, p. 265). In this description and elsewhere, the tone is detached and, in the detail about the “Noels”, superior. The superiority is again evident when the narrative moves into free indirect style to inhabit the mind of Probst’s unwanted friend Jack. The reader learns that Jack “thinks it might be a nifty idea, between activities, to pay a short surprise visit to Martin”, maybe even play a joke by pretending to be a wassailer on Martin’s verandah, even though “he has a great reluctance to disturb anyone opening presents” (Franzen, 1988, p. 265). Of course the joke is on Jack; the reader knows Martin is trying to dump his annoying and clueless friend. Jack’s use of the word “nifty”, his observations about trying to fit the joke in “between activities” and his childish fears about interrupting present opening (as if there were not other more inappropriate intrusions to worry about) all serve to highlight his ignorance. Franzen is inviting the reader to laugh *at* the bumbling Jack.

But by the end of *The Corrections*, Franzen is not so enamored of satiric cleverness.

And his growing distaste for satire in favour of a more empathetic viewpoint is of a piece with post-postmodernism's push for a return to sincerity. As Foster Wallace pointed out in *E Unibus Pluram*, the "institutionalization of hip irony" (Wallace 1990, p. 63) has led to a situation in which betraying oneself as naïve, of being had in some way, is to be feared above all else. In *The Corrections* and *Freedom*, Franzen rebels against this view, putting irony and sincerity side by side to highlight the unattractiveness of the former. When Jonah loses his "Narnian dearness" (Franzen 2001, p. 139) for example, it is the ironic tone and coolness he adopts from his brothers that Franzen mocks (and rather sadly), not his pre-ironic state. It is Caleb and Aaron's "winks and smiles" at their younger brother's innocence, Caroline's encouragement of her sons' cynicism and Caleb's cultivated "trademark irony" (Franzen 2001, p. 561) that Franzen satirizes, not the object of their ironic attention. And when Caleb asks, ironically, whether Jonah is looking forward to visiting Christmasland and Jonah replies "in an effortfully wicked voice, 'It's probably really stupid.'" (Franzen 2001, p. 561) the tone is one of tragedy. Jonah's effort, his qualifiers of uncertainty, his half-achieved mockery (if he were an ironic master like Caleb he would have feigned exaggerated excitement over Christmasland) highlight the innocence and individuality about to flicker out. Franzen again highlights the limits of irony when, at the end of the book, Chip is waiting on an airstrip trying to escape Lithuania. Speaking to his mother on the phone, Chip is cluelessly "unprepared for the joy" (Franzen 2001, p. 527) he hears in her voice when he says he's going to try to get home for Christmas. Giving up his detached, satiric viewpoint, Chip decides he will try to flash a couple of hundreds and get "those 'bumping privileges' he'd lampooned on Lithuania.com" (Franzen 2001, p. 528). Chip's desperation is comic, but endearingly so, and just as Jonah's sincerity is contrasted favourably against his brother's "trademark

irony”, what I will call Chip’s *consciously unselfconscious* desire to get home is set against the cultivated irony of two American college girls also waiting for a flight out of Lithuania. “Cheryl looked out a window and asked, with withering undergraduate disdain, ‘excuse me, why is there a tank in the middle of the runway?’” (Franzen 2001, p. 528).

Sincerity involves a concurrence of the inner feeling with the outward expression or action, a concurrence that, Kelly points out, has become hard to maintain in the age of advertising and representational uncertainty (Kelly 2010). Nonetheless, *The Corrections* presents this seamless linking of inner intent and outward action as desirable. On Christmas Eve for example, sleeping in his old childhood room, Gary Lambert fantasises about taking up his old hobby of building model trains and is “gripped by an ancient excitement at the prospect of running trains through mountains of papier-mache, across high popsicle-stick trestles ...” (Franzen 2001, p. 573). The details of papier-mache and popsicle-sticks make his passion comic and yet endearing. Indeed, Gary’s passion for model trains is reminiscent of Franzen’s own “uncool” (Franzen 2011b) passion for bird watching. And Gary’s genuine love of model trains is set against the false hobbies of his son Caleb who “had figured out that if he used the word ‘hobby’, Gary would green-light expenditures he otherwise might have forbidden Caroline to make” (Franzen 2001, p. 179). Caleb quickly takes up and drops photography, computers and surveillance. But while Gary’s gullibility is endearing; Caleb’s opportunism is not.

The fear of being taken in, of being seen as naïve, also looms large for *Freedom’s* characters. But again, Franzen views their gullibility with empathy not satire. Patty Berglund is embarrassed by her unusually long-held belief in Santa but the reader is likely to think, along with Patty’s father, that “her innocence was beautiful” (Franzen 2010, p. 81). Nonetheless, Patty links her gullibility over Santa to her later deception (on

Christmas Eve) at the hands of a friend who falsely claims to have cancer. Parents have a duty, Patty says, to help their children recognize reality (Franzen 2010, p. 81). By the end of *Freedom*, however, Patty has learnt to combine her sincerity with an ability to avoid being taken in; a combination that allows Franzen to explore the possibilities of sincerity beyond postmodernism, beyond “the hermeneutics of suspicion”(Kelly 2010). We see Patty through the eyes of Linda Hoffbauer, a right-wing Tea Party type who, despite herself, is charmed by Patty’s honesty and seemingly sincere gift of a “Glad-wrapped plate of Christmas cookies” (Franzen 2010, p. 559). When Linda asks why she’s never met Patty before, Patty admits that she and Walter have been taking a little breather. Rather than taking this as the simple truth, Linda sees Patty’s admission as a “clever formulation” (Franzen 2010, p. 559) but one with which it is nonetheless hard to pick moral fault. In an attempt to get her to “slip up and betray her liberal disagreeability”, Linda asks Patty if she’s a bird-lover. But Linda is flummoxed when Patty replies honestly that she’s not a bird-lover but “I’m a Walter-lover so I sort of get it” (Franzen 2010, p. 560). Eventually, “as if to complete the rout” Patty invites her neighbours to a New Year’s party and cooks “an extensive and very tasty looking spread from which Linda, with an almost pleasant sense of defeat, loaded up a large plate” (Franzen 2010, p. 560). Linda’s suspicions of Patty’s motives, and her own murky intentions, evoke a post-postmodern anxiety about the possibility of true sincerity in an age all-too-aware of the split between intent and performance and of the anticipatory logic behind communication. Despite these suspicions however, and in a very post-postmodern “instantiat(ion) of single-entendre principles” (Wallace 1990, p. 81) Patty’s apparent sincerity works.

In 1947, almost thirty years before he wrote about sincerity, Lionel Trilling identified within the American literary establishment a tendency to view serious novels as those that addressed real problems such as “the situation of the dispossessed Oklahoma farmer and whose fault it is” (Trilling 1947, p. 85). These were novels as social reportage, aimed at raising political consciousness and ending injustice. Serious books were those that, in a phrase the young Franzen might have used, held up “some image of society to consider and condemn” (Trilling 1947, p. 85). Fictions that were drawn from the imagined interactions of everyday life, on the other hand, were considered frivolous. Trilling argued that such a distinction was wrong. It was only through using the “ladder of social observation” that novelists could properly reveal the reality beneath appearances and thus truly “scale the moral and aesthetic heights” (Trilling 1947, p. 83). To his mind, the only American novelists who had truly done this, who had dealt “with society as the field of tragic reality” were William Faulkner and Henry James (Trilling 1947, p. 84).

Like Trilling, Eagleton identifies Henry James as a truly moral writer who understood that morality “means exploring the texture and quality of human behaviour as richly and sensitively as you can” (Eagleton, 2003, p. 143) rather than simply correcting it or weeding out its foibles. Eagleton argues that true morality is “about protecting the thriving of the human” but warned, “it can be confused with the obligations and the prohibitions rather than the thriving” (Eagleton, 2003, p.145). Morality as understood by Trilling and Eagleton is, like freedom, properly conceived of in a positive sense as creating the conditions for human thriving. Such a conception should thus be expected to have more use for forgiving comedy of the kind identified by Wood, than for corrective satire, and more in common with tragic rather than depressive

realism.

As noted at the start of this chapter, most reviews of Franzen's work consider them in the context of his famous *Harper's* Essay and the concerns it raises about future of the novel. After lamenting the novelist's waning authority and complaining about the difficulty of writing a culturally-engaged novel, Franzen pleads: isn't it enough, he asks, to write "sentences of such authenticity that refuge can be taken in them ... Isn't it a lot?" (Franzen 1996, p. 84). Unfortunately, Franzen's language of capitulation together with his baleful plea suggest that focussing in on characters and their personal struggles means giving up on the novel as an agent of social change. It was perhaps this suggestion that led Colin Hutchinson to surmise that Franzen's first three novels promote quietism through a "prevalent political tone ... that both accepts and regrets the apparent draining of all possible resistance, conflict or meaningful difference" (Hutchinson 2009, p. 193). Or Ty Hawkins' view that Franzen's novels rob his readers of agency by depicting characters much like themselves, who face similar situations, but are helpless to change anything much except their own behaviour (Hawkins 2010, p. 64). Wood however, implicitly rejects the false binarism between the social novel and the novel of character when he opines that Franzen writes best when he is concentrating on the human consciousness rather than cultural issues "and find(s) willy-nilly, that consciousness is the true Stendhalian mirror, reflecting helplessly the random angles of the age" (Wood, 2009, p. 190). In Wood's view, Franzen fails as a novelist precisely when he tries to be a social one because that is when "his tone begins to crack, and Franzen the clever journalist, the pocket theorist, peers through" (Wood 2004, p. 195). Franzen succeeds when "trusting the bona fides of the implicit, (being) perfectly capable of respecting the intrinsic and not chasing after the explicit" (Wood 2004, p. 194). What Wood is saying is that Franzen



succeeds at being a social novelist when he *stops* trying to be one and concentrates instead on character; this is because the well-rendered character will always reflect the sociological forces that shape it.

There is another sense in which a focus on character does not entail abandoning the novel's social mission. Considered from a post-postmodern viewpoint, the "quietism" that Hutchinson sees in some of Franzen's characters is not so much a capitulation to the forces of consumer capitalism but a stand against them. Remember that Franzen sees the attempt to erase or correct the age-old human questions of mystery and manners as one of the most sinister manifestations of advanced capitalism. For Franzen, this "therapeutic optimism" (Franzen 1996)—whether in the form of pharmaceuticals or the denial of our own specific individuality—is consumer capitalism's attempt to make us think we've solved, or can solve, the properly unanswerable questions of human existence. Indeed, as Carey points out in the introduction to her interview with Franzen, much of *The Corrections* is a riff on "the impulse to correct our fallen, flawed humanity" (Carey 2003, p. 184). Similarly Franzen sees in the "atomised privacy" (Franzen 1996, p. 70) and consumer-centred narcissism of contemporary life, an attempt to erase the problem of manners or of how we interact. Indeed he sees an attempt to entirely erase our need for other people.

as our markets discover and respond to what consumers most want, our technology has become extremely adept at creating products that correspond to our fantasy ideal of an erotic relationship, in which the beloved object asks for nothing and gives everything, instantly, and makes us feel all powerful, and doesn't throw terrible scenes when it's replaced by an even sexier object and is

consigned to a drawer. To speak more generally, the ultimate goal of technology ... is to replace a natural world that's indifferent to our wishes—a world of resistance—with a world so responsive to our wishes as to be, effectively, a mere extension of the self (Franzen 2011b).

In a culture such as the one Franzen evokes, one would expect a novelist with a social mission to fight the false sense of security created by therapeutic optimism and to continually reassert the reality of human existence: that we are none of us the centre of the universe, that there is an objective “world of resistance” (Franzen 2011b) with which we must grapple. One would expect him to rebel against any facile and false means of ‘solving’ the human condition. For Franzen, the mission of the social novel in a culture of advanced capitalism is to protect and preserve the human, to correct the urge to correct. In this context, the personal novel *is* the political or social novel. The moments of “deep crisis and significance” in the life of an individual character,

have a social and political valence as well, because they're what we mean when we talk about being a person, about being an individual, about having an identity ... All the things that would become impossible politically, emotionally, culturally, psychologically if people ever were to become simply the sum of their consumer choices: this is, indirectly, what the novel is trying to preserve and fight in favour of. (Franzen 2009)

Back in 1947, Trilling identified another important social function of the novel that focuses on characters and their interactions: the awakening of a moral imagination in

its readers. What Trilling calls “moral realism”, and which bears a striking resemblance to Franzen’s “tragic realism”, encourages the reader to see that reality may *not* be as he or she had been led to believe, prompts them to question their own motives and, as a result enables them to empathise with others. The social utility of such moral realism, Trilling said, is in its ability to guard against the moral indignation that can manifest in unfair restrictions and prejudice. It was an important role, Trilling noted, given the “moral passions are even more wilful and imperious and impatient than the self-seeking passions” (Trilling 1947, p. 91). In words that could just as easily be applied to contemporary America, Trilling concluded, “perhaps at no other time has the enterprise of moral realism ever been so much needed, for at no other time have so many people committed themselves to moral righteousness” (Trilling 1947, p. 88).

## CONCLUSION.

At a time when our discourse has become so sharply polarized—  
at a time when we are far too eager to lay the blame for all that ails the world at  
the feet of those who think differently than we do—it's important for us to pause for a  
moment and make sure that we are talking with each other in a way that heals, not a way  
that wounds... Rather than pointing fingers or assigning blame, let us use this occasion to  
expand our moral imaginations, to listen to each other more carefully, to sharpen our  
instincts for empathy, and remind ourselves of all the ways our hopes and dreams are  
bound together.

Barack Obama, January 2011

## I

Following the 2011 Arizona shooting of US Democrat Gabrielle Giffords and 18 other  
Americans, the U.S. President Barack Obama pleaded with his countrymen and women  
to give each other a break. In words that echoed those delivered by Lionel Trilling over  
half a century before, Obama decried the growing tendency for Americans “to lay the  
blame for all that ails the world at the feet of those who think differently than we do”  
(Obama 2011).

The shootings turned out to have been the work of a young man who was  
mentally ill, but that revelation did little to dispel the feeling that things had got out of  
hand in American public life. Political, ideological and religious differences had  
deteriorated into enmity and the imagery of warfare was commonly employed in the most  
benign of circumstances (the Tea Party's Sarah Palin for example, had drawn up a  
“targetlist” of opposing constituencies, of which Ms Giffords' was one, and decorated

them with rifle crosshairs (Montopoli 2011). Indeed, just months before the shooting, in October 2010, comedian Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show* had organised “A Rally to Restore Sanity”, to which he called people who “believe that the only time it’s appropriate to draw a Hitler moustache on someone is when that person is actually Hitler” (Stewart 2010).

In a “moment of sincerity” at the Rally’s conclusion, Stewart said: “we can have animus, and not be enemies. But unfortunately, one of our main tools in delineating the two broke.” Stewart called for a toning down of public debate noting that “there are terrorists, and racists, and Stalinists, and theocrats, but those are titles that must be earned! You must have the resume!” (Stewart 2010)

The growing tendency for “Americans (to) talk about almost everything as if it were a war” (Tannen 1998, p. 13) was identified back in 1998 by the linguist Deborah Tannen in her book, *The Argument Culture: Stopping America’s War of Words*. Tannen drew on extensive examples from academia, politics, law and the media to illustrate her point that much of U.S. life had become deadlocked by the culture of criticism and attack. Referring to a 1996 cartoon that depicts a young boy announcing he hopes to “spoil someone’s bid for the Presidency” when he grows up, Tannen writes that the “cruellest harvest” of the culture of obstructionism is that “it creates an atmosphere easily mimicked by citizens in which creating roadblocks to others’ accomplishments is more appealing than actually accomplishing something yourself” (Tannen 1998, p. 107). The tendency that Tannen recognised is similar to the one Foster Wallace later identified in the cultural sphere, and which saw art change from “being a creative instantiation of real values to ... a creative rejection of bogus values” (Wallace 1990, p. 59). Franzen too noted something similar when he argued “the essence of postmodernism is an adolescent fear of getting taken in,

an adolescent conviction that all systems are phony” (Franzen 2002a, p. 111). It is the tendency to correct or criticise, rather than to empathise or build. Tannen foresaw that the culture of argument would have dire consequences.

The danger of “regarding intellectual interchange as a fight ... (is that it) contributes to an atmosphere of animosity that spreads like a fever. In a society that includes people who express their anger by shooting, the result of demonising those with whom we disagree can be truly tragic (Tannen 1998, p. 16).

As a young novelist, Franzen set out to change the world using satiric and “subversive bombs” to force Americans to sit up and take note of the societal ills that abounded in “monopoly capitalism” (Franzen 1996, p. 60). Those bombs didn’t go off. But even if they had, it is arguable they would have done little to change things for the better. Satire might have been an effective way of correcting society’s problems in the age of social novelists like Dickens. But when, as Tannen, Stewart and Foster Wallace have argued, satire has become part of the enabling architecture of the advanced capitalist hegemony and its attendant culture of disabling irony and obstructionism then it has outlived its usefulness for the social novelist.

During a 2011 appearance for The Sydney Writers’ Festival, Franzen spoke about the difference between *The Corrections* and his most recent novel, *Freedom*. In *Freedom*, he said, he had tried *not* to write a satire. He had learned that he didn’t want to make fun of people anymore, but rather to understand them. Franzen attributed much of this change

of heart to his mother's death. He had loosely based some of the attributes of *The Corrections*' Enid Lambert on his mother, and for much of the novel, Franzen treats Enid satirically. But following his mother's death and as he himself grew older, Franzen began to realise that Enid/ his mother was not as laughable as he had once thought. He was better able to understand why she had done what she had. And he simply didn't *feel* like satirising her anymore (Franzen 2011a). The transformation in Franzen's writing may simply be a result of his age, but it is a transformation that has eluded other satirists. Moreover, as Franzen himself argues, perpetual adolescence is one of postmodernism's most defining characteristics. In a similar vein, Tannen likens the current US political climate to an unsupervised classroom of teenagers. "Citizens are like squabbling siblings with no authority figures who can command enough respect to contain and channel their aggressive impulses. It is as if every day is a day with a substitute teacher who cannot control the class and maintain order" (Tannen 1998, p. 25). Post-postmodernism involves a refusal to camp out in adolescence.

Franzen continues to address large-scale social issues such as environmental decimation and rampant consumerism in his later novels, but whether his books will engender change on these fronts is a moot point. Still, in his post-postmodern phase he may well contribute to a movement against the culture of superficiality and irony, against the idea that the human condition can be 'solved'. His writing might even encourage cultural rebellion, insofar as he identifies activities such as reading and writing as rebellion. And in so far as he writes what Trilling called moral realism, he will be engaging with what is arguably the biggest social problem in contemporary America: the increasing polarisation—or to put it in less political and more human terms, the growing dearth of empathy—between different political and ideological viewpoints, a dearth

partly created by the techo-consumerist culture that makes each of us the centre of our own obsequious universe. In such a milieu there are already plenty of people trying to ‘correct’, plenty of people doing satiric imitations of monosyllabic Tea-Partiers or snobbish champagne swillers; there are not so many trying to see through the opposition’s eyes. In his sympathetic treatment of the type of character previously not afforded anything beyond ironic sneering, Franzen is offering a way to relate to the Other that is sorely needed in American life.

Thus one could interpret the Christmas at the conclusion of *Freedom*—when Patty Berglund helps reconcile her very angry, left wing, bird-loving, greenie husband Walter with his very angry, environment-destroying, right-wing, cat-owning neighbour by baking the woman cookies—as promoting quietism or as a renouncement of political agency.

Or one could see it as an attempt at political action of the kind alluded to by Trilling; that is, the creation of empathy between different viewpoints, a renunciation of the corrective impulse in favour of acceptance. If the key to power and suppression is to divide and rule, perhaps the first step of rebellion is to regroup the scattered.



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